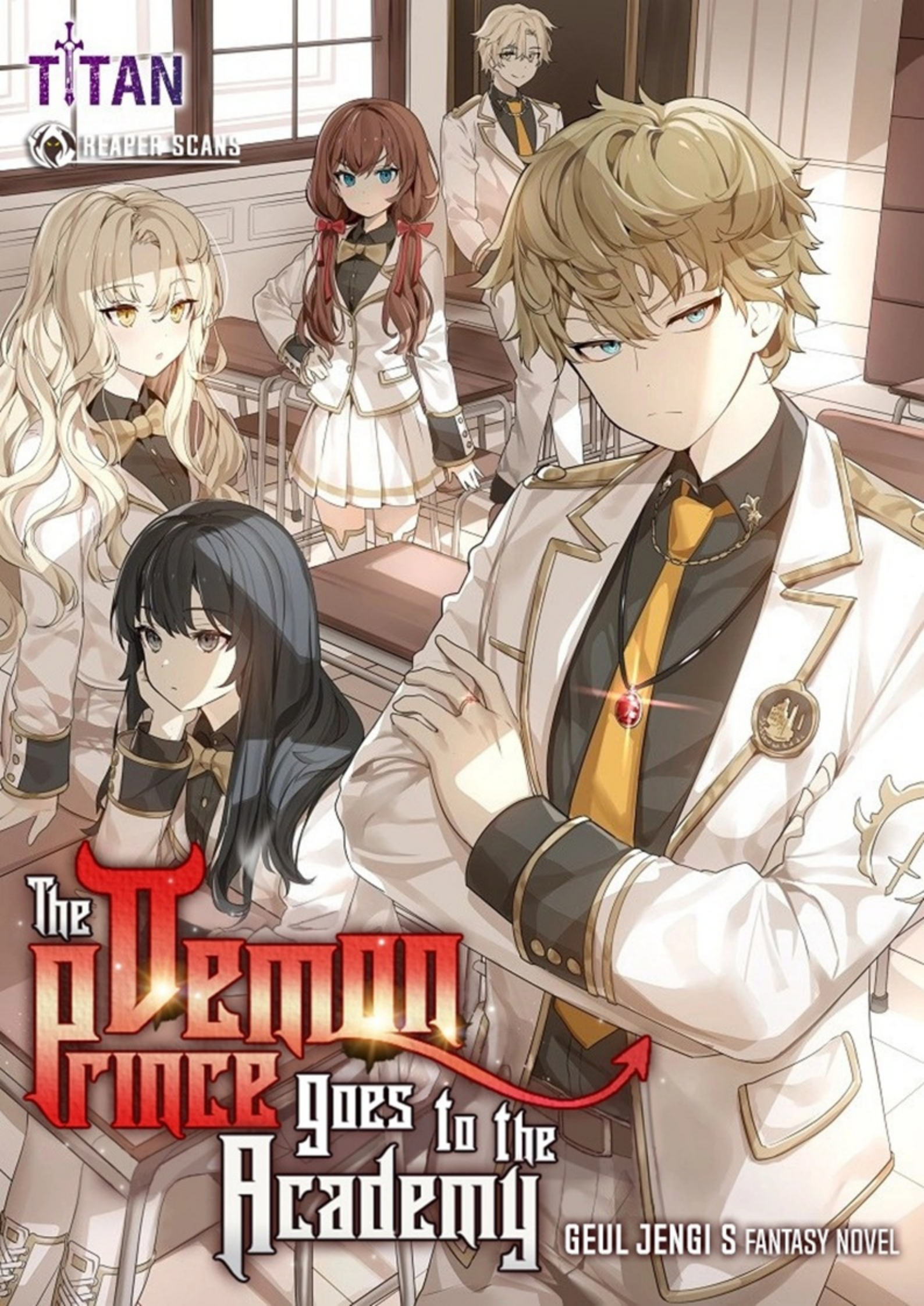
TITAN
REAPER SCANS
The Demon Prince goes to the Academy
GEUL JENGI S FANTASY NOVEL

THE DEMON PRINCE GOES TO THE ACADEMY

– 마왕은 학원에 간다 –

- VOLUME 12 -

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CHAPTER 551

The royal mausoleum is not only the final resting place for royalty.

It is also where those who have achieved great accomplishments worthy of being buried alongside the royals are laid to rest. Being interred in the royal mausoleum, despite not being a royal, signifies tremendous honor and recognition of one's contributions to the empire.

As such, those buried here are inevitably great heroes or renowned figures from history.

In conclusion, Olivia's suggestion to loot the mausoleum to bolster the Death Knights is, in terms of practicality, the best choice.

Assuming it is successful, it is a much better location than battlefields such as Serandia.

Replenishing the Death Knights is virtually impossible at the allied base, and as long as they avoid being seen at the royal mausoleum, they should be fine.

Of course, Charlotte turned pale and trembled at the thought.

"If it must be done… I suppose we have no choice…"

As much as she wanted to protest against the idea, she believed she had no right to do so and sat down hesitantly.

"But will the remains properly become Death Knights?"

"I'm not sure, as I haven't done this sort of thing often. But the important thing is, there are many heroes who haven't been buried for long."

Olivia grinned.

My sister…

My sister is frightening these days.

"There are heroes who entered the royal mausoleum after contributing during the Gate incident, and even before that, there was the Demon War, right? Among the casualties of the Demon War, those who particularly stood out were likely to be buried in the royal mausoleum."

"Ah…"

"I suppose that's true…"

Charlotte nodded with a miserable expression.

It was an era where heroes were bound to be numerous.

Thus, Olivia's claim that there would be an abundance of remains in the royal mausoleum to serve as material for the Death Knights was undoubtedly true.

Countless sacrifices were happening, and they would continue until the war ended.

The living are dying.

But does that justify exploiting someone's death?

It's uncertain.

There's no guarantee that this immoral act won't lead to another.

However, the necessity of it remains unchanged.

No one could deny Olivia's words that there was nothing to hide considering the lives of the living were at stake.

Should what we are about to do be called grave robbing?

Grave robbing typically involves plundering the items buried with the deceased. However, we have no interest in those items and are instead looting the remains themselves. Morally speaking, it's an act even worse than grave robbing.

Winter.

Just as the allies were regrouping, we too were planning to strengthen our forces by raising the remains in the royal mausoleum as Death Knights.

To do so, we would have to leave Edina and head to the Imperial Capital.

There would be three members in total.

Olivia Lanze, who would be responsible for raising the Death Knights; Harriet de Saint Owan, who would assist with transportation and prepare for emergency escapes; and myself, to handle any physical emergencies.

Airi could be helpful, and Charlotte even more so, but there was no real reason to bring them along. What Charlotte would see would be unbearable for her, and Airi, as a demon, would face constraints in her actions.

"Tsk, I thought I'd finally get a date alone with Reinhardt, but of course, someone has to tag along."

Olivia frowned as she looked at Harriet preparing the casting.

"Without me, how do you plan to get to the Imperial Capital?"

,

"You could just leave us there for a couple of months and then come back to pick us up, right?"

"Was it really necessary to take this long in the first place?"

"You never know what could happen with people. Didn't the alliance troops say they'd take a break too? I wanted to take a break with Reinhardt as well."

Olivia smirked at me, as if to say that we could spend the time doing various things until spring arrived.

What is she trying to say?

"Considering the state of the Imperial Capital, I doubt you'd say that."

"Hmm… is it really that bad?"

"It's not something I can easily explain, but… you'll see when you get there."

If we really wanted to rest, Edina would be better. The Imperial Capital was not a place where one could entertain thoughts of relaxation.

The Imperial Capital in our memories was intact, but the gloomy atmosphere that pervaded the entire city had turned it into an ashen city.

After all, we were going there to secure powerful undead.

"Don't talk nonsense when you should be careful not to incur divine punishment, sister."

"Technically, since we're awakening them with divine power, why would we be punished? If it's a blessing, then it's a blessing."

"Why does this sound right when you put it that way?"

Harriet continued casting, seemingly tired of the argument.

That's right.

It's not about incurring divine punishment; it's because Kier's power is divine power in the first place. It's not punishment for raising undead with Kier's power, but rather a blessing in itself, isn't it?

I'm slowly getting dizzy.

"Let's go."

Blue mana lines began to boil from Harriet's body, and soon, with a flash of light, we left Edina.

An alley in the Imperial Capital.

As soon as Olivia arrived via Mass Teleport, she pinched her nose.

“…What is this smell?"

Harriet, who also had a weak stomach, retched as soon as she arrived.

The alley was filled with a nauseating smell, a mix of rot, decay, and an indescribable sour odor.

Even for an alleyway, this was extreme.

Despite the cold winter temperatures, the smell remained potent.

"Let's get out of here."

"Ugh, I feel like I'm going to vomit… bleh…”

"No! Don't actually vomit!"

"If I do, catch it with your hands…”

"Seems like you can endure it since you're still talking nonsense. Let's hurry up."

The fact that she could talk nonsense meant she could endure it.

I also wanted to leave this place quickly, as the mysterious smell was unbearable.

Ugh!

But then.

The sound of someone 'really' retching came from behind.

“…Your Highness?"

“…Is she really doing it?"

Olivia stared blankly at Harriet, who was shivering with her hand against the wall.

-Ugh, ugh… ugh!

She was trying to force down the urge to vomit?

"Don't hold it back! Just let it out!"

When I think about it, Olivia is from the streets.

But our princess, Harriet, was a real princess, not someone who could handle such things.

"…"

"Vomit girl."

"Stop it! Stop calling me that!"

At Olivia's words, Harriet's face turned tearful and her eyes welled up.

It was true that I had exposed our princess to many hardships, but now, on top of everything else, I had to watch her retch and vomit in an alleyway.

Harriet's eyes were filled with tears, which she blinked away.

Despite this, Olivia seemed concerned. When she gently patted Harriet's back, Harriet's eyes widened, and she seemed to feel much better.

"Don't underestimate the power of the Holy Order's leader."

"That's not your power, it's the power of the gods. Why do you act like you're so great?"

"If that power manifests through my body, why is it the power of the gods and not mine?"

"Reinhardt, the gods must be crazy. They give their power to people like this. Isn't that right?"

Harriet looked at me, as if seeking agreement.

"S-sorry…"

"Why are you sorry?"

"Ah, nothing… just…"

I accidentally apologized.

Oh! The gods must be strange because I am strange!

Both Olivia and Harriet seemed to have developed a passive disrespect for the divine.

Olivia seemed to think she was the amazing one, not the gods. Harriet believed the gods were mad.

Anyway, we left the alleyway and entered the street.

We wore our robes inside out, and Harriet cast a spell to keep passersby from recognizing us.

We arrived in the southern Wenster District of the Imperial Capital.

It was a place closer to the temple than the palace.

"Shouldn't we drink something?"

"…Mmm."

Even our thick-skinned Harriet would have cried and made a scene if this had happened in the past.

Meeting that brutal person must have been hard on her.

A pervasive gloom could be felt throughout the streets, but I decided to buy a drink for Harriet to wash her mouth.

"…Damn, why is a bottle of water three silver coins?"

Not only were there few places to buy, but the prices were also outrageous.

It was just water.

The price of water in the Imperial Capital had gone mad, costing three silver coins for a bottle.

Harriet rinsed her mouth with the water, guilt on her face.

"We don't need to check the other prices."

Olivia seemed to grasp the situation in the Imperial Capital from the price of a single bottle of water and clicked her tongue.

We walked through the streets, seeing the hungry faces of the people and the clearly starving passersby.

Death lurked in the battlefield, but here, death came in the form of hunger.

It was winter.

Fortunately, we didn't witness it, but homeless people who had lost their way would freeze to death in the alleys.

"This place is relatively better. The situation in the refugee areas on the outskirts is even worse."

The Imperial Capital had lost its ability to support the excessive population.

Yet, the empire had to maintain a massive army.

Those neglected in between perished.

"Why are people gathering over there? Is it a distribution?"

“Line up! Line up!”

Following Olivia's pointing finger, we saw people bustling in one corner of a square.

We thought it might be food distribution, but it wasn't.

"It's a recruitment office."

Harriet recognized what it was.

Security guards controlled the crowd from above, and above them, people dressed as imperial officers shouted loudly.

Their voices were drowned out by the clamor of the people.

"In the army, at least you won't starve."

Olivia said with a bitter smile.

If they were going to starve to death, they might as well enlist. Dying by a monster or by starvation was the same.

It wasn't for a lofty cause, humanity's mission, or dedication.

Becoming a soldier meant at least not starving.

Ordinary, expendable soldiers were replenished in this manner, and it wasn't such an unexpected thing.

Thrown into battle with no proper training in weapons, wearing shabby armor and carrying a single spear, they were mere cannon fodder.

These people would avoid starvation only to be endlessly replenished and sent to their deaths.

"If we do our job right, the war will end sooner, and that'll be good for them too. Let's not waste our time looking elsewhere and focus on where we need to go."

At Olivia's words, Harriet and I follow her lead.

Her words were optimistic, yet eerily cold and calculated.

But that was the reality of the situation.

"Sis… this is kind of scary."

"If crying could end all of this, I'd cry for everyone in the world. But that's not the case, is it?"

"…"

Nothing could be resolved by shedding tears, so we didn't cry.

Just as I had changed, just as Liana had changed, Olivia had changed too.

The royal mausoleum housed the graves of not only the royal ancestors but also the great heroes and prominent figures who had accomplished extraordinary feats alongside them.

Before setting out, we received ample information from Charlotte about such matters.

Even though we claimed to have no interest in the royal remains, Charlotte had helped violate her ancestors' mausoleum and facilitated the use of wicked power there.

It was a difficult decision Charlotte had made on her own.

We were crossing the bridge connecting the southern and northern parts of the Imperial Capital.

To the north, the Imperial Palace Emperatos stood atop a hill, and to the south, the Temple was visible.

The vast refugee camp on the outskirts of the Imperial Capital was not visible from the city's central locations. It was perhaps better that way, as seeing it would only bring despair.

"It seems things are serious if even the magic train is out of operation."

"Indeed."

Resources, including magic stones, were so scarce that the magic train, the core means of transportation on the Imperial Capital, was not in operation except for military and administrative needs. So we traveled on foot.

We felt the reality that most of the empire's national power was consumed in constructing and operating the Titans, as we observed the halted magic train on the Imperial Capital.

How were they coping with the monsters that occasionally raided the refugee camps?

It was better not to see and be plagued with such unnecessary thoughts.

Olivia muttered as she looked at the distant castle.

"Even heroes have ranks… Well, that's natural, I suppose."

Not every person who achieved glory could be placed in the royal mausoleum.

Only a select few war heroes enjoyed the honor of being interred in the royal mausoleum. Generally, such honors were granted to the deceased, and very few living individuals had already secured such distinction.

In any case, not all heroes resided in the royal mausoleum.

"We could just raid the national cemetery in the northern part of the Imperial Capital instead of the royal mausoleum…"

According to Charlotte, the national cemetery in the northern part of the Imperial Capital also contained the remains of individuals who had accomplished great deeds.

It made sense since not all heroes could be placed in the royal mausoleum, which would be overcrowded.

The privilege of sharing a tomb with the royals was not something everyone could enjoy.

Therefore, the national cemetery was naturally larger in scale and housed more remains than the royal mausoleum.

The Great Demon War and the Gate Incident.

At least those who die in the two wars, the Great Demon War and the Gate Incident, and achieve great feats are more likely to be found in the national cemetery rather than the royal mausoleum.

Strictly speaking, those whose remains haven't yet decayed or who have a higher chance of returning are there.

"It's easier to enter the national cemetery on the outskirts than to sneak into the royal palace. I think we should try going there first," says Harriet.

Olivia shrugs at Harriet's suggestion. "What are you talking about? We're going to both."

“…I thought you'd say something like that." Harriet sighs.

"We need to use everything we can. Who knows? Maybe one of the famous heroes will wake up and help us?"

The five hero companions.

Ragan Artorius.

Ragdina Olfi.

Seijaria.

Mullerun.

Sheidin.

Their tombs are undoubtedly in the royal mausoleum.

"Of course, we'd need the assumption that the corpses are there, and we can raise them."

"I can't not go. I don't know how helpful the undead versions of the hero companions would be, but still."

Of course, it's only possible under the assumption that there are properly preserved bodies.

Charlotte made sure to tell us this.

Ragan Artorius's tomb is in the royal mausoleum, but there is no body inside.

Neither Ragan Artorius, who fought and disappeared with the Demon King, nor the Demon King Valier's corpse is present.

Ragan Artorius's body is gone.

So, we can't revive him.

However, the other four heroes' remains were retrieved.

Although some can only be called incomplete remains, they were recovered.

So, excluding Ragan Artorius's tomb, the bodies of the other four heroes are definitely in the royal mausoleum.

"Ragan Artorius is impossible, but for the others, we have to try because we never know."

Olivia says that, looking at me as if she knows.

"Can we call this revenge, Reinhardt?"

Technically, we're reviving those who contributed to my father's death as undead to fight.

"If it helps, it helps. If it doesn't, it doesn't. Is there a need for such grand words?"

"Sometimes, you seem to have no emotions at all. Especially in this regard."

Well, that's because he's not my actual parent, so it can't be helped.

If I were the real Valier, I would have hated Ellen, and things wouldn't have turned out like this.

But I didn't say that.

There can be no affection or attachment to the Valier Senior. We've never even had a conversation.

But there is some guilt.

Valier wished for the Gate Incident not to happen.

But in the end, I was the cause of the Gate Incident.

Valier Senior's desire was forever destroyed because of me.

From there stems a sense of guilt and responsibility.

That's the extent of the feelings I have towards Valier Senior.

However, I couldn't say those feelings were insignificant.

CHAPTER 552

The Royal Mausoleum is located within the Imperial Palace.

Infiltrating the Imperial Palace is almost as difficult as infiltrating the Temple.

Of course, now that the Temple is nearly empty, infiltrating the Imperial Palace may be more difficult, but the condition of breaking through the entrance is the same.

One must have a pass related to entry, and unauthorized entry is impossible.

Naturally, entering through magic, including teleportation, is impossible.

The warp gate in the Palace of Spring is inoperative without the activation artifact, and even if it were present, the gate is already broken, making entry impossible.

Sarkegaar could change into a bird and enter the Temple, but I cannot do that. Strictly speaking, even if I could transform, I wouldn't be able to fly.

Even if I could, there would be no use in me entering alone. I can wield the power of corruption that resides in Tiamata, but I cannot control it as freely as Olivia can.

Charlotte suggested several ways for us to infiltrate the Imperial Palace, but all involved significant risks and were far from perfect.

It would be strange if Charlotte knew how to infiltrate the Imperial Palace without permission in the first place.

Most of the Empire's elite, including Shanafel, have left their posts.

Even if we somehow infiltrate the Imperial Palace and are discovered, we may be able to cause havoc and escape, but the news of the Demon King's return would be problematic for both the Empire and the Alliance.

People are afraid of me.

Just the thought that the Empire might collapse under the Demon King's attack while

I destroy the gate could send the Alliance into a panic.

We came here to carry out a daring plan, hoping that no commotion would arise.

Infiltrating the Imperial Palace is not solely my responsibility, at least for now…

Not yet, since we're not entering now.

So, for now, we're in a safer place: the National Cemetery in the northern hills of the Imperial Palace.

This place is indeed an honorable resting place for those who have made great achievements.

Not only those who entered the Royal Mausoleum are heroes.

"It's amazing."

We were standing on a plain where the National Cemetery in the northern part of Imperial Palace could be seen from afar.

It was more like a park than a cemetery, being a large, well-maintained area.

The reason it remains intact despite being on the outskirts of the Imperial Palace is that monsters see no value in destroying this place.

Monsters are not interested in corpses, after all.

"Surprisingly, there are people coming and going."

"They have to be here."

Of course, there were troops at the massive entrance, and quite a few visitors were seen.

They could be family members or people who came to comfort the deceased warriors.

No matter how difficult life is, there must be those who come to pay their respects. In fact, there might be even more visitors during such times.

People mourning, remembering, and grieving for the dead.

We came here to steal corpses from them.

Anyone can come to pay their respects, and anyone can be in this place.

There are troops and gatekeepers, but one doesn't need a special status to enter here.

That's why we were able to enter the National Cemetery without any hindrance, just like the others who came and went freely.

It's more like a massive park than a cemetery.

The Royal Mausoleum is, of course, a place where only royalty can enter, while this place is open to the public.

One might wonder what the point of having such a massive park-like National Cemetery is for those struggling to survive.

Perhaps it was fortunate that the foundation of the royal capital had not crumbled enough for outright tomb raiding to occur in this place.

Given that it was a burial site, the people passing by maintained a somber demeanor, regardless of their appearances.

As they entered, they did not immediately find a dense collection of tombs, but instead discovered a map indicating various spaces designated for memorial purposes.

Looking at the map, Olivia crossed her arms.

"The area is divided into sections. It seems the cemetery has been expanded to the east. There's a section specifically for the fallen soldiers."

The areas accessible to them differed according to the level of their achievements.

Some were buried in outdoor tombs, while there were temples and underground catacombs for those with great accomplishments.

"First, we'll visit the soldiers' cemetery, and then we'll head to the central catacombs."

They were certainly strange people, considering they wouldn't be punished for their actions…

While others mourned with somber expressions, they were plotting to steal.

No, their intentions were even worse than theft.

"There are quite a few people around. It's still early in the day. We should wait until night to take action."

Though time had passed since they arrived at the royal capital due to their walk, it was still daytime.

"We have some time. Let's go there."

Seeing where I pointed, Olivia tilted her head, and Harriet did the same.

The place I pointed to on the map was no ordinary location.

The Unclaimed Graves.

Merely looking at it weighed heavily on their hearts, but Charlotte had told them.

“…They're there."

Epinhauser and Loyarl.

They had heard that their tombs were here.

On the day the Gate incident happened.

Epinhauser, Loyar, Lucinil, and Sarkegaar had come to rescue me.

Epinhauser and Loyar died, while Lucinil and Sarkegaar were captured.

Their corpses wouldn't have been placed in this national cemetery from the beginning.

Although the details were unknown, they were buried in the Unclaimed Graves of the national cemetery through some means.

Both were seen as humanity's traitors, siding with the Demon King. Thus, they couldn't have their names engraved on tombstones.

Burying them in the national cemetery's Unclaimed Graves might have been a form of regret and atonement by the Gardias royal family.

Not that it would bring back the dead.

Olivia and Harriet knew that Epinhauser, a teacher, had died fighting to save me, and they also knew about Loyar.

Epinhauser and Loyar, who couldn't have their names engraved on tombstones due to their identity, became the owners of the Unclaimed Graves.

"…"

Nameless tombstones spread out around the memorial tower.

I didn't know which of the numerous tombstones belonged to Loyar and which to Epinhauser.

Harriet and Olivia had stern expressions as well.

Were they afraid of what I might say?

A dreadful imagination.

They couldn't help but think of our purpose here and its connection.

They might think I would try to resurrect Loyar and Epinhauser as Death Knights.

"Reinhardt… even if they come back, they probably won't have their consciousness or self-awareness…"

"…"

"Raising the dead is different from becoming a Death Knight while alive."

Epinhauser, who had been a Swordmaster.

Loyar, who was believed to have been even more skilled.

Naturally, turning them into Death Knights would be helpful.

But that wouldn't be the case.

"Why would I do that?"

It might be selfish, but there was no other way.

"I don't want to turn someone I know into something like that."

I came here to create expendable tools for war.

And I have no intention of engaging in the horrible act of using those who were once precious to me.

However, creating such things from strangers doesn't make the act any less horrifying.

No, the very idea of considering it acceptable for strangers, but not for loved ones, is even more disgustingly selfish.

As horrifying as the thought may be, I must create tools that I can treat as expendable. And these people are beings I cannot consider as mere tools.

They are the ones who sacrificed themselves for me.

Let's leave them be, at least.

Raising them again won't bring back their souls. No, if their souls were to return, it would be a horrifying thing.

I can't say for certain how much of a difference there is between exploiting the

deaths of strangers and exploiting the deaths of those who mattered to me.

But perhaps such favoritism is unavoidable.

What did Loyar want?

It seemed like she wanted the reconstruction of the demon realm, but it also seemed like she didn't.

She didn't seem to be very loyal to me, but in the end, she was a loyal subordinate, no different from Sarkegaar.

Everyone in the Rotary Club died.

After losing everything, Loyar died while trying to protect me, the last thing she had left.

I don't know much about Loyar.

And I know even less about Epinhauser.

"I still don't understand."

"What don't you understand?"

"Why Epinhauser died trying to save me."

Epinhauser's attempt to save me was not related to the Black Order.

In fact, the Order tried to kill me, and the remaining core forces were annihilated. The scattered remnants were not worth worrying about, so in a sense, the Black Order was essentially destroyed.

Epinhauser believed in me.

I don't know what he believed, but he tried to save me because of that belief.

"Do you remember when I fought against the Orbis-class guys?"

"Yeah…"

The fights against Lilka Eren and Oscar de Gardias.

Those events eventually led to the Orbis-class academy crisis.

"Epinhauser said something in the disciplinary committee."

"What did he say?"

"He said that I was the most talented individual in Temple history."

I thought it was just a lie to protect me.

How could I be called that when Ellen was around? After the disciplinary committee ended, I told Epinhauser that, and he sternly replied that he genuinely believed it.

"I know my abilities better than anyone else. But no matter how much I thought about it, I didn't think I was that exceptional. So, it was a bit… disconcerting."

What did Epinhauser see in me?

"But looking back now, I can't say that Epinhauser was wrong."

Neither Harriet nor Olivia could respond to my words.

I don't know if I am comparable to Ellen.

But at this point, only a handful of people could face Ellen, and I am one of them.

If I can defeat Ellen, then Epinhauser's words would be true.

I don't know why he died protecting me, or what he saw in me.

I have no intention of reviving him as a Death Knight, and even if I were to revive him, conversation would be impossible, so I will never know.

From the start, I preferred the curt and seemingly uninterested in students, A-class teacher Epinhauser, over the gentle and affectionate B-class teacher like Mustlang.

But I was wrong.

Epinhauser was not a teacher who lacked interest in his students.

I still don't know Epinhauser.

"Let's stop here."

However, it seems he knew me.

CHAPTER 553

Having escaped the Unclaimed Graves, we had to wait for the night.

Once night fell, we would cast a curse upon this land and, using the power of corruption, raise the dead to form our army.

However, Loyar and Epinhauser would be exempt, and there was no justifiable reason for this.

That's what we had decided, so that's what we would do.

But then.

An unexpected situation unfolded.

There were many mourners.

In particular, there were an excessive number of people wearing military uniforms.

And that number was increasing in real-time.

It wasn't strange for those in military uniforms to be in the capital, but their significant presence at the national cemetery was undoubtedly strange.

They all seemed to have expressions of having been away and recently returned.

Soon, they wore the expressions of those who had been stationed at the allied base.

They were soldiers, returning soldiers.

"Did they finish occupying Serandia and receive group vacations?"

"It seems so."

The alliance army planned to lie low until winter.

Because of that, not everyone could return to the capital, but some individuals had undoubtedly received the privilege of returning.

There were many places that those who had been away from the capital for a long time might visit first, but this national cemetery was likely to have the graves of soldiers, knights, and mages who fought during the Gate Incident.

So, it was perhaps only natural that alliance officials would visit the national cemetery.

In the original work, the Serandia Campaign was not a winter event, and during the winter in other regions, the alliance army had chosen to endure.

That's why the war of attrition to protect the base continued.

However, now that Serandia was pacified, the alliance army had sufficiently secured the safety of the nearby garrison.

In a relatively safe environment, while the entire army couldn't return, high-ranking officials or special individuals could spend the winter in the capital or in their safe homeland. Of course, it would vary from person to person.

Now that the monsters in the vicinity of Serandia had been wiped out, the area would be considerably safer. That's why soldiers returning to the capital through mass teleportation existed.

Among the places that the returnees could visit, the national cemetery would be highly likely to be included in their itinerary. It's where their fallen comrades rested, so many would visit, either in groups or individually.

They had been on a long march, so there were those who received vacations.

Naturally, ordinary soldiers wouldn't be able to return to the capital unless there was a significant reason. The ability to move through mass teleportation wasn't a right that anyone could enjoy, unlike warp gates.

So.

Only high-ranking officials of each army, imperial high commanders, and nobles.

High-ranking knights, priests, or mages.

And, the royal-class personnel who could enjoy the privilege.

Perception inhibition magic wasn't infallible. Exceptional knights, as well as high-ranking mages, could detect magic without even casting it. The same applied to invisibility and other types of stealth magic.

While it could be an advanced deception, there was no deception that could fool everyone.

Even supernatural abilities had rare cases of resistance, and I belonged to one of those cases.

Therefore, there was no such thing as magic that could deceive everyone's eyes.

Of course, Harriet could use high-level stealth magic, but casting it carelessly could expose her suspicious movements.

Among those who were entering the national park, there would be those who knew nothing about magic, but as a diverse group of people came, there could also be those who could detect our perception inhibition magic.

I am capable of near-transformation disguises, but Olivia and Harriet cannot do the same.

We can evade the gazes of the unspecified military personnel for now, but we never know when we might be discovered.

We haven't arrived at a dangerous place, but it's becoming one.

"Let's get out of here for now. It would be a headache if we suddenly caught the attention of one of the royal mages."

"Right, we should."

We must leave before more dangerous people arrive at the national cemetery.

There shouldn't have been any vacations for the allied forces.

But, looking at those entering the national cemetery, it was clear that the allied forces were attributing great significance to this victory.

You can tell by their ranks.

Not just commanders, but many others as well. This means that the allied forces are giving a wide range of leave.

Honestly, there's no other choice but to give them leave after achieving such a crucial victory.

Whether to call it an escape or not, we, Olivia, and Harriet left the national cemetery before attracting unwanted attention.

In a nearby quiet park, Olivia and I sat absentmindedly on a half-broken bench.

Pop!

"I checked, and the allied forces keep returning to the square in front of the Imperial Palace. It seems like they're using mass teleportation."

Harriet, who had quickly scouted the situation of the returning allied forces through short-distance space travel, said so.

"The allied forces are really ecstatic about this victory, aren't they?"

Olivia crossed her arms and clicked her tongue at the ill-timed situation.

Victory.

Yes, there were irreversible deaths, but it was by no means a defeat.

No, rather, it is precisely because of such victories that rest is needed.

"It must be for morale. There were a lot of sacrifices."

The situation has stabilized, and the military will have a long break. That's why they will send back those who want to return to the Imperial Capital like free tickets. Of course, it will take a long time to reintegrate those who have been sent back into the battlefield. Most likely, not many will return anyway.

"But this might make the regular soldiers who can't go back even more… depressed."

Harriet seemed worried about whether this was the right thing to do, regardless of how much it interfered with our strategy, and if it had any meaning for morale.

Could it be that she thinks only high-ranking officials can rest in the Imperial Capital and others would feel deprived?

At Harriet's uncertain reaction, Olivia chuckled.

"Do you think there are many people with places to return to? Most people won't want to go, even if they are allowed to. Didn't you see earlier? This place is considered where they can't even get a proper meal. If the Imperial Capital is like this, what about the other cities that are still left?"

"Ah… I see…"

Not everyone's hometown is in the Imperial Capital.

Those who joined the army out of fear of starvation might be afraid to leave the army as well.

Many regular soldiers might find the barracks, where they are provided with food and shelter, cozier than their hellish hometowns in the Imperial Capital or various places of the allied forces.

To think the battlefield is more comfortable.

The reality of the allied forces is that most people can't enjoy their vacations even if they want to return to their hometowns, simply because they have no place to go.

So, only a very small number of people would actually want to return to the Imperial Capital, which is why even relatively low-ranking soldiers can return there.

"Anyway, the problem is that we can't tell who's going to be where in that joint

cemetery now, not just ordinary visitors."

The number of people in the capital was increasing, and among them, it was impossible to guarantee that there wouldn't be a master class or a great mage.

"We can't try again if we get caught or run into any problems the first time. The security will be strengthened. Of course, we could just kill everyone and proceed with the ritual, but you, Reinhardt, wouldn't permit that from the beginning, right?"

"Sis… then the reason for making the Death Knights becomes meaningless…"

"I didn't say we're not doing it, did I? Anyway, once the allied forces start marching again, we won't have the time or energy to focus on this. And we'll be busy too, so actually, we might be the ones running out of time…"

"Damn, we should have come a day earlier…"

There was nothing to be done about what had already happened, but the situation seemed to be dragging on endlessly.

As Harriet had said, the goal of creating Death Knights was to reduce casualties, but killing everyone in the national cemetery to make Death Knights would be a contradictory action, regardless of right or wrong.

"For now, there shouldn't be any visitors at night, so the number of people should decrease quite a bit during that time. But there's always a possibility of an emergency. And in this situation, we need to realize that the overall combat power of the Empire has increased significantly. If a commotion breaks out… you know?"

"…I guess so."

High-ranking officials were not just powerful but also had a high probability of having returned, like Shanafel's knights or the royal mage corps.

If an unavoidable battle breaks out, something absurd might happen. We could escape through Harriet, but there's always the possibility of unforeseen circumstances.

It's obvious that there won't be many people in the national cemetery at night.

However, there might be a few who are strong enough to be dangerous or who can detect our ritual.

Perhaps it would be better to find time to come after winter passes and people leave the Empire.

The national cemetery is vast.

Even if there are one or two people in that vast area, once Olivia begins creating Death Knights through the ritual, someone will see the ground or the coffin lids being kicked open as the Death Knights emerge…

"Let's change the order."

"Order?"

"The number of watchful eyes in the national cemetery has increased. There's one place that hasn't changed much."

A place where most ordinary people can't even enter.

"The royal mausoleum. Let's start there."

It's likely that the place is deserted even now, as many soldiers are on leave.

Therefore, even if we loot the place, it will take some time for the theft to be discovered.

We will first target the royal mausoleum and then return here.

I have been helping Bertus unilaterally, but I never sought his permission for that.

This is a matter that goes far beyond crossing the line. After this incident, if Bertus genuinely tried to kill me, I would have no excuse.

There's no difference between the national cemetery and the royal mausoleum. If Bertus knew that I was planning to resurrect the corpses and bones there as Death Knights for our forces, he might bite his tongue and die on the spot.

Since it's unilateral assistance, I'll also carry out unilateral plunder.

The national cemetery seemed easier, but due to the circumstances, it has become more complicated. The more watchful eyes there are, the higher the risk of detection, and those eyes are likely to belong to dangerous individuals.

First, we will target the royal mausoleum and then the national cemetery.

After securing the Death Knights, we will make our escape.

“So, it seems we'll have to infiltrate the Imperial Palace now…”

We were currently situated north of the Imperial Capital, and the massive, fortified walls of the Imperial Palace Emperatos could be seen to the south.

A place fortified both physically and magically.

A magical barrier of the same caliber as that surrounding a temple.

So impressive that, when the barrier is at its maximum power, it can block a significant number of meteors.

And a barrier that prevents the entry of demons. In the case of Sarkegaar and myself, we could pass through after transforming, but Airi couldn't.

Of course, Charlotte, who was half-demon, had managed to live there without any issues, so we assumed that, in some cases, the barrier could be temporarily deactivated or not really matter within the palace.

Charlotte had shared a few methods with us.

Firstly, there was the option of using the underground waterways.

"There's a way to access the palace's sewer system by riding through the waterways… The Empire isn't foolish, though, so the waterways are naturally guarded against people passing through, and while I'm not sure if dispelling the barrier is possible, if it is, then we could enter that way. At least it's not a place where we would easily attract attention," she explained.

There were gaps in the security, indeed.

But they were prepared for intruders, and that preparation would certainly be beyond the ordinary.

Charlotte had said that alarms were installed and that the floodgates wouldn't be easy to break through.

If we could break through, we'd be able to enter the palace without anyone noticing. The only uncertainty was whether or not we'd actually be able to do so.

If Charlotte knew ways for just anyone to infiltrate the palace, she, as a member of the imperial family, would have been in a position where she should have blocked those methods at the source. So, it didn't make sense for Charlotte to know how to sneak into the palace in the first place.

"We could hide in a carriage carrying tribute or other goods into the palace… Of course, we'd have to avoid being detected at the checkpoint. And we'd need to disguise or bribe a tribute carriage, which would put more than just us at risk if something went wrong."

"I see…"

Harriet sighed.

"For me, all I'd need to do is knock out someone with access to the palace and steal their identification, but that's pointless if I'm the only one who can get in…"

Using tribute goods as a cover.

Disguising one's identity.

Using the waterways.

While there was also the option of posing as someone's servant, that was impossible since we had no connections to the royal family anymore.

Naturally, asking Bertus to open the doors for us to rob the royal mausoleum was out of the question.

"If nothing else works, we could dig our way up from the underground waterways beneath the palace. But, of course, that would mean tampering with the barrier. So,

ultimately, we'd need some magical defenses."

It was too much to ask even a capable person like Harriet to handle this on her own.

Magic wasn't the solution to everything.

All the methods Charlotte knew of were already well-guarded against.

Despite her best efforts, Charlotte could only inform us of methods that didn't guarantee success.

"How did you plan to get into the palace if nothing works?"

Olivia pursed her lips.

"It's not that it's impossible, it's just that it's dangerous."

In the end, it was only a matter of possibility. There was no absolute guarantee that it couldn't be done.

It was just dangerous.

"And we should be as discreet as possible."

"Is it really going to be a mess? If it was a day earlier, I wouldn't know, but now the scale will be a bit larger?"

There is no guarantee that we will die, but there is no guarantee that we can escape either.

There's no need for words like "is there a reason" or anything like that.

We were caught trying to dig up the royal mausoleum or trespass without permission at an unexpected timing, so saying that there were various circumstances would only be nonsense.

We're going to do something really bad, and persuasion is pointless.

"Magic won't get us in, right?"

“…I don't know the method, but yes, realistically speaking."

Teleporting into the palace is impossible.

There are various ways, but in the end, there is only one safest method at this point.

"Let's use psychic powers."

If magic doesn't work, Supernatural powers.

"Supernatural powers…? You don't mean…?"

"Yeah, we met one recently, didn't we?"

We need Kono Lint.

"I'm not sure if he's arrived yet… but there's a promised meeting place. Let's head there. He might already be there."

"A promise? Lint agreed to help with this? When? Did you visit the allied base in the meantime? Did you have time for that?"

At my words, Harriet's eyes widened and she shook her head.

"No? I never made a promise with him?"

"What? Then who did you make a promise with?"

"With Sarkegaar."

At my words, Olivia and Harriet's expressions soured.

Didn't I have time to talk to Kono Lint in the first place?

I made a promise with the person I planned to bring along.

Of course, without considering their own will.

"Wow…”

"Reinhardt really never changes in some ways…”

Neither Olivia nor Harriet could hide their disgusted expressions.

The promised meeting place was none other than the former headquarters of the Rotary Club.

It was the underground waterway beneath Bronze Gate Bridge.

"You crazy bastard! What do you want me to do!"

Kono Lint, who seemed to have been forcibly brought there, was captured by Antirianus.

And there was a person who was definitely disguised as a female soldier of the alliance, with a face I had never seen before, but it was undoubtedly Sarkegaar.

"There's something you need to help us with."

You and I.

The scale is quite different now.

As I put my arm around his shoulder, his face turned pale blue.

"Don't touch my body, you perverted freak!"

Of course.

He was disgusted, but for a different reason than before.

"?"

"…?"

Everyone else seemed to not understand the meaning of the word "pervert" at all.

"Why should I help you!"

Kono Lint's frightened voice echoed through the sewer.

There was no Rotary Club anymore, and the refugees were in evacuation camps, so there were no homeless people living under the bridge anymore. Even if he shouted and it echoed, there was no one to hear it.

"It's because there's no one else who can help me in this situation."

“…Is that the attitude of someone asking for help?"

That's right, though.

Supernatural powers are almost impossible to block unless one is a few special individuals, and infiltrating the Imperial Palace is a piece of cake for Kono Lint, plus he can bring others in as well.

"No, didn't you come here after hearing about it? What's the point of not being able to help after coming this far?"

"If I had known it would come to this, I wouldn't have come on my own……”

"What? Then what did you think was going on……?"

It was only then that I got a clear look at Sarkegaar, who was standing beside Antirianus.

Sarkegaar, disguised as a female soldier of the allied forces.

With an inexplicably youthful appearance.

A beautiful girl at that.

“…Could it be, am I right in thinking this?"

Has this guy fallen for this pattern again?

"No! It's not! Whatever you're thinking, it's not that……!"

-Chuckle

"Uh, what's going on?"

As Sarkegaar transformed from the appearance of an allied soldier into the form of Count Argon Ponteus, a disguise he had once frequently assumed, Kono Lint's face turned pale.

He’s witnessing this kind of thing for the second time.

The transformed Sarkegaar grinned and said,

"It was easy, Your Majesty. He followed me without question when I asked for help."

A pitifully beautiful girl who seems to have been conscripted at an age when she should know nothing of fighting.

It was a sight that couldn't help but wrench Kono Lint's heart.

He mumbled with a lost expression,

"I've been… deceived again…”

“…There's one thing about you that never changes."

It wasn't me who said that, but Harriet.

"No! I'm the type to help anyone who asks! It's definitely not that! I swear… damn it…”

Kono Lint's face reddened and he shouted.

"Yes! I get it! From now on, the only girls who'll mess up my life are ones like you! Ugh! Damn it! I won't be fooled again!"

In the end, he broke down and wept.

Come to think of it,

Isn't he the greatest victim of my misdeeds?

“……Do you experience this often? What are you talking about?"

"What do you mean?"

Naturally, Olivia and Harriet tilted their heads at the bizarre remark.

"You don't need to know about that!"

I glared at Kono Lint, as if to say I'd kill him if he said another word.

CHAPTER 554

Kono Lint, who had been at the Allied Forces' stronghold, was lured by Sarkegaar and taken to the outskirts of the stronghold where Antirianus was waiting.

After being dragged there, it seemed Antirianus had used mass teleportation while Kono Lint was under a hypnotic trance, bringing him here.

Thus, Kono Lint had no idea what was happening.

Yet, he did not try to escape, most likely because he had a history, albeit a negative one, with Antirianus. The last time, he was kidnapped by him.

So, while their relationship wasn't a good one, they had a connection.

Truthfully, Kono Lint could have escaped easily if he wanted to.

However, despite being in a panic, he ultimately didn't run away.

"So, what do you want from me?"

Kono Lint knew that I was trying to handle the Gate situation in my own way, although I hadn't explained everything in detail.

He was fundamentally a good guy.

To be honest, he was probably here to help not just because he was dragged by a woman, but also because he couldn't turn a blind eye to someone asking for help.

Of course, it wouldn't be true to say that the fact she was a woman had nothing to do with it.

"What could I possibly want from you?"

"My supernatural power?"

"Yeah, I need to get into a place that's difficult to enter."

Kono Lint was a fool.

But, he wasn't a complete idiot.

At this point, with all the great wizards hanging around the Imperial Capital, it was obvious that I had sought him out because I needed to enter a place that couldn't be accessed by magic.

"Temple? What are you planning to do in the temple…? Ellen is stationed at the base."

He was indeed a serious fool.

Even lacking in tact.

Oh.

It's not my place to say, but I know I'm a scoundrel!

Kono Lint didn't seem to notice Olivia's expression turning icy in an instant.

"Why would I go to a temple? We're going somewhere else."

"Somewhere else? You can't mean…"

Finally realizing where I intended to go, his face turned pale.

"You can't mean the Imperial Palace? What are you planning to do there? Are you trying to involve me? What do you want me to do? I won't do it! I'm going back!"

He tried to shake off Sarkegaar and Antirianus' grip on his arms.

"Mr. Lint, we don't necessarily need your voluntary cooperation."

Antirianus stared at Kono Lint with a smile.

Oh no, what nonsense is he going to spout now?

"Wh… what?"

"If we damage your brain and turn you into a puppet that only listens to me, you'll be broken as a human, but you'll be a great tool…"

"Stop talking nonsense! I won't do it! I said I won't!"

I was only asking for temporary help, not intending to use him for the rest of his life!

However, Antirianus wouldn't stop.

"Even if Mr. Lint escapes from our grasp, where else can he go besides the Imperial Capital and the Allied Forces' base? The entire world has become a place where humans cannot tread. You might be able to run away for now, but eventually, I'll be able to find you. Ah. It's a good time to put a tracking spell on you."

"He, help…! Please, Grandfather!"

"I never said I would kill you. I'm merely going to tinker with your brain a bit…"

"Ah, stop it already! You're killing me!"

To be fair, Antirianus is evil, but his evil is more like malevolence than wickedness, as he prefers to torment or frighten his opponents rather than kill them.

Kono Lint rolled his eyes and his face began to turn pale.

I didn't intend to threaten him, but Antirianus's threats turned out to be surprisingly effective.

Indeed.

Although he has the capability to escape from us now, he has limited places to go, we can find Kono Lint whenever we want if we grit our teeth and search for him. Unless he chooses to live as a wild man in the wilderness, it's certain.

It's useless to flee since we can catch him again anyway.

It seemed clear that this had broken Kono Lint's will to escape.

"No… I didn't mean to scare you. I just wanted to ask for help, politely. Don't pay attention to what that old man said."

"You tried to seduce me with beauty and now you're talking about being polite? Nonsense!"

"Well, I can't argue with that…”

Although I never ordered Sarkegaar to seduce Kono Lint using beauty, I had used a similar tactic in the past, so I have no retort.

"Anyway, help us. We need to get into the palace. All you have to do is let us in and then take us out at the designated time."

"Why should I do that? It's a serious crime! If I get caught, I'll be hanged! It's treason!"

Hmm.

I suppose that's the response I get for asking nicely?

"Looks like asking nicely won't work."

"Fine, do whatever you want. I won't help you…”

"Do it."

I said shortly, looking at Kono Lint.

"Just do it, kid. Do you think I'm a pushover?"

"In the end, it comes to this…”

Kono Lint grumbled under his breath with a sullen expression.

As expected.

A king's request is more of a command than a plea.

"Follow my orders, and if you get caught, just use my name! Say you were ordered to do it! Say you did it because you were threatened with death! You don't think I'd actually kill you, do you?"

But…

If Antirianus is malevolent…

Am I not just a scoundrel?

In the end, Kono Lint decided it was futile to run away due to my coercion and Antirianus's threats, and quietly began to follow me.

I sent Sarkegaar and Antirianus back.

After raiding the royal mausoleum, the next destination was the national cemetery.

Our group had grown by one: me, Olivia, Harriet, and now Kono Lint.

Thanks to Antirianus's useless actions of abducting Kono Lint during the Serandia preemptive strike, we now had his help – or more accurately, coercion.

Neither Harriet nor Kono Lint were particularly close to each other. Even with me, they were not close.

But now, Kono Lint was traveling with the three main enemies of the empire.

"But… Even if we're wearing hoods, is it okay to walk around like this…?"

All three of our faces are well-known on wanted posters.

So, it seemed he was worried that if we were caught, the entire imperial capital would be turned upside down.

"We have magic to hinder perception and noise-canceling spells. Of course, there might be some magicians who can detect us, but don't worry about that. There aren't that many people who are on such high alert."

"I see…"

The crowd itself serves as a curtain.

Wearing a hood may seem strange in a place like a national cemetery, but here, it's a common sight.

One cannot be suspicious of every person on the street.

Kono Lint looks at Olivia, who is walking silently this time.

"You are… Olivia Lanze… right?"

“…So you know me?"

"It would be strange if I didn't."

During the time at the temple, it would be strange not to know her, and now it would be strange not to know her as well. In fact, since Olivia often visited our dormitory, Kono Lint must have known her.

Even though he knows we're not doing malicious deeds as known to the world, he can't help but be scared. It's inevitable that this guy is nervous, especially since he's with us, who seem to be their colleagues.

"But what are you planning to do in the palace? You're not going to… Bertus…”

"Do you think I would do that?"

"Of course not. There's no reason for you to do that… But then, why are you going to the palace…?"

Should I tell him or not?

Harriet had a gloomy expression, and Olivia shrugged her shoulders as if telling me to decide.

There's no need to tell him explicitly.

If he hears what we are planning to do, he will naturally be shocked.

And knowing that he helped with such a task will make him feel guilty.

It's strange to tell him, and it's strange not to tell him.

On the other hand, it seems better to just use him, but it also seems like he has a right to know. I'm not sure.

"In the end, it's a task that will help the war, but many people won't understand or accept it."

I give Kono Lint the choice.

"Do you want to live without knowing, which is a good thing? Or do you want to live knowing something you won't like?"

At my words, Kono Lint looks at me from under his hood.

He must have guessed that we were not trying to do anything ordinary by infiltrating the palace.

How long have we been walking?

"I don't want to be used without knowing anything."

Although he seems the same, Kono Lint has changed during the war.

"I need to know… what I'm doing."

In that case, he should know.

"We're going to enter the royal mausoleum and resurrect the war heroes' remains as Death Knights."

"You're insane…!"

"I knew you'd react like this."

I quickly cover Kono Lint's mouth.

Just as we were all appalled when we first heard Olivia's suggestion, Kono Lint's first reaction was inevitable.

But after screaming once, he was speechless for a while.

His thoughts would not be much different from mine and Harriet's.

They're already dead.

They cannot return, and what we use are only the traces of those who have disappeared.

If so, if we can save the living with those traces, shouldn't we do it? Is it really such a terrible thing to do?

He must be thinking these thoughts.

However, just like I decided not to turn Epinhauser and Loyar into Death Knights, there's a contradiction.

"Do you… think this is right?"

Kono Lint's thoughts seemed to lead nowhere but to lingering questions, and Harriet had no words to offer either, as she too could not come to a conclusion on the matter.

Neither did I.

I wondered if it was neither hypocrisy nor abomination but merely a terrible thing. Such a thought crossed my mind.

"This is right."

However, it was not I but Olivia who answered.

"War is what happens when people claim to want peace. Such contradictory actions have been a long-standing tradition handed down through generations of humanity."

Olivia covered her mouth as if to laugh at something.

Perhaps she was laughing at the whole world.

But since she would be the one creating the Death Knight, she would be laughing at herself the hardest.

"I think this is right. If I'm wrong later, then it's all my fault. Let's just go with that."

Although Olivia said she would take all the blame, we could never think that way.

"We're almost there."

The walls of the Imperial Palace, Emperatos, were getting closer.

Near the western side of the Imperial Palace, we entered a narrow alleyway in a sparsely populated area.

Although there was no avoiding the stench, it wasn't as bad as the first place we had entered.

We didn't have a map of the Imperial Palace, but Harriet had a schematic drawn by Charlotte.

"Charlotte can draw, too?"

Olivia gaped at the overly detailed sketch of the Imperial Capital, considering it was just roughly drawn.

Indeed, Charlotte seemed to have a negative opinion about painting. We had discussed it at the Spring Palace.

Of course, this had nothing to do with painting, but Charlotte had accurately drawn the map as if she had measured it with a ruler.

She knew and could do a reasonable amount of various knowledge that one didn't necessarily need to know.

…What does it mean to be royalty?

When I think about it, there's something fundamentally wrong with me being a king.

It's natural to be bad at it!

Kono Lint flinched at the mention of the missing princess's name, but it was no

surprise since everyone knew that I had disappeared with the princess during her execution.

The drawing, as Olivia had mentioned, was very detailed for something roughly sketched.

Central Palace Tetra.

The seasonal palaces located in the east, west, south, and north.

Not only that, but the auxiliary buildings of each palace and their locations, as well as the surrounding areas of our target, the Royal Mausoleum, were precisely recorded, even including the tram lines and the locations of the palace guards' barracks.

"Charlotte drew this…?"

"Yes."

"Then Charlotte knows too?"

"That's right."

Kono Lint looked stunned as he tried to guess what the princess was thinking when she drew the map.

That's right.

It's like asking her to draw a map for grave robbing her ancestors.

Actually, it wasn't a request, but Charlotte had drawn it anyway.

What was Charlotte feeling when she drew this? Harriet looked up at the winter sky between the alleys.

"It would be better to move when night falls."

As time passed and daylight grew short, darkness began to set in.

"According to Charlotte, the entrance to the Royal Mausoleum is always closed, and two guards constantly guard the door. Naturally, the guards protect the entrance but

can't enter the mausoleum themselves. It's not a place that's open to the public at all times."

"So, once we get inside, the place is empty?"

"That's right. It's not accessible to just anyone at any time. Of course, there are maintenance personnel who come and go periodically, but it's usually closed. They change the staff once a week, and that's not today but tomorrow."

That's good news.

"The lock isn't operated by a key but by magic. It seems that the mage in charge of managing the mausoleum knows the spell to unlock it. First, I'll try to dispel the magic on the door and see if it's possible or not."

"And if it's impossible?"

"Then it gets a bit complicated. We'll either have to find out the unlocking spell from the mausoleum's caretaker or sneak in when it opens tomorrow. We'd have to do the job twice, and of course, there's still a risk."

Even if they managed to get inside the palace, entering the mausoleum wouldn't be easy.

"However, the defensive magic on the mausoleum itself shouldn't be too strong. There's also the aggressive option of breaking through a window or the ceiling, Reinhardt. You can use your Aura Blade. I'll disable the alarms and use noise-canceling magic. It should be easier to bypass the building's alarms than the lock on the door. So, we don't necessarily have to wait until tomorrow."

Since it's a one-time mission and they won't be coming back, they can take the risk.

The idea that bypassing the building's alarms would be easier than unlocking the door seemed plausible, according to Harriet.

Of course, it's a bit strange to think that breaking through a wall or window is easier than opening a door.

But on second thought, that's probably true for any building.

If they can't enter quietly, they'll make some noise and leave traces behind.

Harriet now looked at Kono Lint, who had the most critical but seemingly easiest role.

"Lint, your job is to get the three of us over that wall. Then I'll use all the stealth and disguise spells I know. Spatial teleportation magic is blocked inside the palace. I don't know how long it will take us to work inside, but…"

"Wait, just a moment."

Kono Lint interrupted Harriet's explanation.

"So… I just need to get you guys in and out, right?"

"Yes."

"But… from what I've heard… wouldn't it be easier for all of us if I… got you into the… cemetery?"

"…"

"…"

"Well, yes."

Harriet and I were silent at Kono Lint's puzzled question, and Olivia nodded.

He's right.

If Kono Lint doesn't just help us get inside the palace but assists us from start to finish, the job would be much simpler and easier.

"It's true, but putting such a burden on you, Lint… And it won't be a pleasant sight to see."

It was inevitable that Harriet hesitated to ask him to do more.

Kono Lint is an outsider, and they brought him along through coercion and intimidation.

If he also helps with infiltrating the mausoleum, he becomes not just an accomplice but a key player. He would even have to witness the resurrection of the Death Knights.

In essence, Kono Lint would be doing almost everything.

It's ironic not to involve him too much, given that they forced him to join them. If Kono Lint saw the former heroes becoming Death Knights with his own eyes, it might even traumatize him.

Initially, we only intended to ask him to help us get in and out of the palace.

However, he shook his head.

"Once we've decided to do this, there's no difference in doing more or less, right?"

"…"

"I don't know if this is the right thing to do."

He looks at me.

"But regardless of whether it's right or wrong… If I'm going to play a role in this, I won't half-heartedly interfere. After all, I've already agreed to help."

Kono Lint can neither fully approve nor disapprove of this task.

That's why, if he's going to play a role, he seemed determined to oversee everything rather than assisting half-heartedly and later claiming ignorance.

Kono Lint looks at Harriet.

"Don't make me a coward."

“…I'm sorry. That was rude of me."

Harriet apologized, realizing that her consideration to exclude him from crucial tasks was, in fact, impolite.

"No, no. It's not exactly like that… Well…”

He stuttered, seemingly not expecting Harriet to apologize.

We're going to plunder the royal mausoleum, resurrect the heroes' remains as Death Knights.

"You do understand that, as you said, this is a major crime that could go down in history, right?"

At my words, Kono Lint smirks.

"To leave a mark in history, history must continue, right?"

“…That's true."

Everyone grows.

That's evident, even when it's not by one's own will but by the influence of others and the environment.

In the end, all we could do was let out a bitter laugh.

CHAPTER 555

Kono Lint was capable of teleporting all three of us, including himself, at once.

"Good, we can all move together in one go."

Though it was a short distance, we were all able to teleport instantly as Kono Lint activated his ability while holding hands with each of us.

"How many people can you transport at once?"

Since it was her first time experiencing teleportation through supernatural powers rather than magic, Harriet asked.

"It's not about the number of people, but the weight. I'm not exactly sure, but excluding my own weight, maybe a little more than 200 kilograms? Also, the object's size cannot be too large. No matter how light, I can't teleport something incredibly huge."

He added that it was an issue determined by mass and volume, rather than a simple number.

It appeared that if the combined weight of the three of us exceeded 200 kilograms, he would not be able to transport us.

"It seems fortunate, in a way…"

Harriet revealed a subtle smile. When you think about it, she was more of a thinker than someone with a high level of physical activity.

Watching Harriet breathe a sigh of relief, Olivia puffed out her chest and spoke confidently.

"You're still young, so it's not a problem now, but if you don't exercise enough as you age, your body will become flabby. Brace yourself for that."

Of course, Olivia was very active, a close combat specialist, and had even become

something akin to a necromancer. She was far from being physically inactive.

So, as expected…

In many ways, she was quite formidable…

"What are you talking about, old muscle pig?"

"What?! I'm not old nor a pig! Where is this firm body even remotely pig-like, you tiny thing!"

"Aren't you going to age eventually? Regardless, you'll always be five years older than me. In fact, you already seem a bit saggy, don't you?"

"I'm not saggy! I'm not! My physical age is younger than yours! You've been hunched over books in a corner all the time, so you have a bent back and a turtle neck!"

"What? That's not true! My neck isn't bent!"

As Olivia and Harriet bickered, Kono Lint looked at me.

"Are those two… always like that?"

"Even in a place like this, it seems."

"Ah."

It wasn't that we had infiltrated the palace yet, and we were in an empty alley, so it didn't matter if they argued.

The two of them would always fight when they met, and that was no different here.

It was embarrassing.

My household management skills were clearly lacking.

No, it wasn't exactly about household management. It was more like… managing a nation, or something like that… Uh…

"It's still a long way to nightfall. Let them fight it out."

"Should we…?"

“Bent! You little turtle! Your spine must be bent too, surely!”

“What's with this old muscle pig!”

“I'm not old! I'm not old! I'm still in my prime! And I'm not a pig!”

“You said that three years ago, so now you're old, right?!”

“Aaargh! I'm going to kill you!”

If you don't give in, you lose.

Since Kono Lint had agreed to cooperate fully, we had a fast pass to infiltrate the palace and even enter the inner sanctum.

He was a possessor of an ability more like a cheat code for infiltration than even Sarkegaar.

If only Kono Lint's combat prowess had reached the level of Erich, history would have been different.

The fact that Kono Lint had no talent or skill in battle was like a balance patch.

Of course, I was the one who made it so. If Kono Lint had the same combat prowess as me, there would be no one who could stop him, even if he went on a rampage to become an emperor.

In a way, I forced a plethora of drawbacks onto him because of his incredibly powerful abilities.

With Kono Lint's help, we crossed the walls of the Imperial Palace.

We were just inside the outer wall, hidden in the shadows where no one's gaze could reach.

There might have been guards on the wall, but there were no people on the ground.

"It's so easy, it's almost disappointing."

It was impossible to know how long it would take to find a way over the wall while interpreting and analyzing the Imperial Palace's barrier, or if it was even possible.

However, with his Supernatural abilities, it seemed he felt disappointed that it happened so easily.

"Alright. The next location is over there."

"Got it."

We moved cautiously, making use of blind spots and spaces where intruders could go unnoticed.

Although it was not impossible to be detected, the four of us used magic for camouflage and concealment, sticking close to Kono Lint as we moved together.

In the center was Tetra.

To the north was the Spring Palace where Charlotte lived.

To the west was the Winter Palace where Bertus lived.

There was no business in the now-empty Winter and Spring Palaces.

To the south were the government institutions, including the Autumn Palace.

To the west were the royal residences, including the Summer Palace.

Our target was the royal residence area in the west and the Cathedral housing the royal mausoleum further inside.

We could move quickly using consecutive teleportation, and there were many people in the spacious palace grounds.

We could pretend to be palace officials and move around, but there was no need to be unnecessarily bold.

-Pop!

With Kono Lint's power, we moved slowly and carefully, sometimes utilizing rooftops and blind spots to move bit by bit.

Experiencing it firsthand, Kono Lint's abilities were so incredible they could hardly be described as a cheat.

If I hadn't done the balance patch, the Gate incident might have been resolved by Kono Lint's power alone.

Soon, we arrived at a garden crevice where the royal mausoleum was faintly visible.

It was a massive Cathedral, and as Harriet had said, two guards stood at the main entrance, guarding the door.

To enter through the main entrance, we needed to secure a dispelling magic, hypnotize or subdue the guards.

If not, we had to deactivate the building's alarm magic, block noise with noise-canceling, and break into the building through a blind spot.

However, with Kono Lint, all those plans were unnecessary.

"We're going straight inside."

"Right."

-Pop!

We instantly moved into the Cathedral housing the royal mausoleum.

Naturally, there was no one inside the Cathedral where the royal mausoleum was located.

However, the interior was brightly lit.

Just in case, all four of us lowered our stance and looked around. The long vertical windows allowed anyone to see inside the Cathedral where the mausoleum was located.

In front of the Cathedral's massive worship hall, there were five giant statues of the gods, and in the middle of the statues was a wide, colossal staircase that led down to the underground.

Although I hadn't expected an overly extravagant atmosphere, the Cathedral overall exuded a solemn feeling with its gray-toned texture.

One might think that the royal mausoleum's Cathedral was almost crude at this level.

However, the monotony evoked a sense of solemnity more than a glamorous tomb would.

Considering this, the solemn atmosphere of the Central Palace Tetra and the empire itself didn't seem to pursue extravagance too much.

In terms of extravagance, the Cathedral was even more so. Of course, in the end, the Cathedral was an imperial institution as well.

"Let's go down."

Crouching low so that no one could see us through the window, we entered the staircase.

Now, we didn't have to worry about anyone seeing us from the outside.

The mausoleum remained empty, as no one was allowed inside unless there was a special occasion.

But as we descended into the eerily quiet royal mausoleum, we couldn't help but hold our breath.

It wasn't so much that we were worried about the possibility of someone being there; it was also clearly because of what we were about to do.

The underground was just as well-lit.

As we descended the long, circular staircase, we entered a high-ceilinged underground space.

Just like the ground level, the underground tomb was dominated by gray tones.

It was a place where solemnity and grandeur were felt more than glamor.

The underground tomb.

It wasn't the creepy and gloomy space commonly known as a catacomb.

No tombs were visible as soon as we descended.

Upon arriving in a large, vault-like space, we were met with four corridors branching out in all directions.

At the entrance of each corridor were stone sculptures with different patterns.

“…By the way, those things. They're not gargoyles, are they?"

I pointed to the stone statues resembling guards in the catacomb.

"I don't feel any magical energy from them. And if there were gargoyles, I would have told you first."

"Really? Wouldn't they have made something like tomb guardians?"

At Olivia's question, Harriet let out a short sigh.

"Considering that the presence of intruders in the royal mausoleum means the palace itself has been breached, there might not have been any need to make them? Of course, we still managed to get in."

"Hmm, when you put it like that, it makes sense."

"I can't even imagine that someone with ill intentions who managed to infiltrate the palace would come to the mausoleum. They would go elsewhere."

"That's true as well. But now we've come to a place where no one expected anyone to enter, right?"

"It seems that way."

A relatively unguarded location.

It would be impossible to anticipate the crazy things we were doing.

If money was the motive, one would rob the royal treasury or the treasure vault; if assassination was the motive, there would be no need to come here; and if information was the motive, there would be no need to come to a place where only the silence of the deceased existed.

In a sense, this place had no value to anyone in the palace, except for the royal family.

So, we were the strange thieves who came to the easiest place to rob, but where not even a speck of dust could be found.

Of course, we had come to steal the remains of people who, though without any particular value, could not be left out in human history.

A place with no value but tremendous symbolism.

In the four branching paths of the royal mausoleum, Harriet examined the directions and symbols.

The north was the burial ground of the royal family, the west for those with great scholarly achievements, the east for artists, and the south for those who had built their reputations in martial arts.

What we needed were not those with clever minds, outstanding inspiration, or noble origin.

We needed the remains of warriors who had achieved martial arts feats on par with war heroes.

Kono Lint, tense or not, held onto my arm.

What's with this guy?

"What's wrong?"

“…I, I'm scared."

Olivia was scary, and Harriet had changed a bit but still seemed irritable, given her harsh exchange with Olivia earlier. So he was holding onto me.

But shouldn't he be most afraid of me?

Ah, right.

He still has motion sickness…

People seem to change but then again, they don't.

But, if you think about it, shouldn't you be most afraid of me in this situation?

Whatever.

Damn.

"What's so scary about this? We came here to do something even scarier."

"W-well, that's true…!"

Kono Lint whispered, as if someone was listening.

But lowering our voices was a matter for all of us.

Our footsteps and conversation became quieter, almost involuntarily.

Was it because of the graves or the thought that we shouldn't be discovered?

There was something ironic about those who had come to disturb someone's eternal rest trying not to disturb the quiet of the grave.

"Let's go."

Harriet led the way, and we followed.

As this was a royal mausoleum, the structure was not haphazardly expanded, becoming labyrinthine.

After walking down a corridor for a while, the space opened up, and we were able to enter the mausoleum of heroes.

An open space appeared, with a long, straight area and stairs leading down once

more.

"The mausoleum starts here on the first floor, and I heard there are five more underground levels. But I heard that only up to the fourth underground level is actually filled."

The cemetery for the great heroes of human history.

It was quite intuitive.

Stone coffins with only the lid visible, buried in the ground, and tombstones symbolizing the heroes' achievements. And on those tombstones were stone tablets with a phrase summarizing their accomplishments and a brief biography.

And behind those tombstones.

"Even… statues…"

Behind each grave was a statue of the hero, seemingly carved in their likeness.

They looked solemn, dignified, and sometimes dynamic, wielding their weapons.

The statues differed due to the different periods they were made in.

[Emperor Langkruten of the Swift Feet, resting here.]

I wasn't interested in the history of the empire, but of course, there was history in the integrated Temple courses.

Thus, among these tombs, I recognized the names of heroes from the history of the empire. Of course, I didn't know every detail.

"All the big shots are gathered here."

Looking at the tombstones, inscriptions, and names of the buried heroes, Olivia grinned, seemingly recognizing almost all of them.

There were about forty tombs on one floor.

With five underground levels, though only four were actually filled, there would be

over a hundred tombs in total.

Was this number large or small?

It was hard to tell.

"Probably… the heroes from the Hero’s companions or the Gate incident and subsequent war heroes would be on the fourth underground level. That's what I heard."

"It's not likely that all of them will rise. The older skeletons might not be able to."

"So, we need to go underground?"

"Yes."

Whether or not these burial arrangements affected the decay of the skeletons, the older ones were less likely to hold any significance.

The recently deceased bodies.

How many Death Knights could we potentially revive from these tombs?

If we could revive them, and the more powerful the deceased warrior was, the stronger the Death Knight would become. Just how powerful could the Death Knights be?

We descended the stairs, heading deeper underground.

We passed statues and tombstones of heroes, eventually reaching the fourth floor below ground.

Upon arrival, we noticed that the structure of the tombs was different from before.

"Those five really are treated differently, aren't they?" Olivia remarked.

"It seems so." Harriet nodded in agreement.

So far, the tombstones and statues had been on both sides of the walls as we descended the stairs.

However, as we reached the bottom of the stairs, we saw five statues and tombs right in front of us.

And in the center of them all.

There was a statue of Alsbringer, held high in the sky.

Similar, yet different faces.

[The Savior of Humanity, the Architect of Justice, Champion of Als]

[The One and Only, the Eternal Warrior]

[Ragan Artorius]

[May he find peace]

In the center stood Ragan Artorius' statue, with two statues on each side of his fellow warriors who accompanied him.

A mage, Mullerun.

A priest, Seijaria.

A ranger, Ragdina Olfi.

A swordmage, Sheidin.

These five, who achieved the greatest feat in human history by slaying the Demon King, were given the most special place in the royal mausoleum, the Hall of Heroes.

In front of us were the tombs of the warriors, but there were still tombs on both sides as well.

"Looking at the years… there are two tombs added since the Gate Incident." Harriet confirmed as she surveyed the corridor. I saw the names too, but they were unfamiliar.

From the Empire's perspective, those who were buried here must have achieved great feats before their deaths.

"Are you suggesting that we… resurrect Ragan Artorius and his fellow warriors as Death Knights…?"

As if to question whether this was allowed, Kono Lint looked at me with a pale face. Ragan Artorius was Ellen's brother, so wasn't it wrong to do that?

It's as if he was asking whether I would do such a thing.

But when you think about it, shouldn't I be the one to do it? After all, I'm the son of the Demon King.

"I understand what you're thinking, but Ragan Artorius' remains aren't here."

"Why?"

"There weren't any remains of his body in the first place."

It's understandable that he would ask such a question since he didn't know that both the Demon King and Ragan Artorius' body had vanished without a trace.

What if it had been there?

Would I have agreed to turn Ragan Artorius' remains into a Death Knight, or would I have opposed it?

I think Olivia would have agreed, while Harriet would have disagreed.

As for me.

Honestly, I'm not sure.

Just as we decided not to resurrect Loyar and Epinhauser, I don't think I would have done the same to Ragan Artorius.

But if his remains had been here, wouldn't commanding the Death Knight of Ragan Artorius, who killed my father, be an incredibly malicious and satisfying revenge?

I have no such intentions, though.

"There's no time for idle chatter. We're going to perform the ritual. I can't say for sure

how many will rise, though."

Swish -

In Olivia's right hand, the demonic sword Tiamata was summoned.

There was no time to indulge in admiration, nor was there any need to worry about the non-existent remains of Ragan Artorius.

They were to resurrect the greatest heroes in human history.

Although they would only be shells, it was certain that even those shells would possess great power.

Kono Lint's eyes widened as he looked at the corrupt black energy swirling in Tiamata.

"Well… Let's get started."

Olivia showed a wicked smile.

In the clutches of the villains of the century, the insult to the heroes of the century begins.

The time was night.

However, no one entered the mausoleum, and it was deep underground, so there was no way our ritual could be detected from the outside.

Though someone outside might be able to detect this energy, that part was being taken care of by Harriet. Seeing that she told us not to worry, it seemed Harriet had her own countermeasures.

Olivia was murmuring something in the center of the fourth floor tomb, with the demonic sword Tiamata stabbed into the ground.

Dark, sinister energy flowed from Tiamata, seeping into each tomb.

It was clear that malicious energy was being infused.

Harriet, Kono Lint, and I were watching the ritual silently from the edge of the stairs leading to the third floor.

"But I know she's a priestess of Tu’an… What the hell happened? And what's that black sword?"

Come to think of it, Kono Lint followed us without knowing the details. He had no idea how Olivia Lanze could wield such wicked power.

"It's Tiamata."

"Tiamata? Tiamata is a holy relic, isn't it? That's… not ominous at all."

"Let me explain briefly, gods and demons are essentially the same being."

“…What are you talking about?"

"That's Tiamata."

"No, no! Explain properly! What are you talking about?"

“…I'll explain."

Perhaps sensing that my explanation was too brief, Harriet grabbed Kono Lint and explained everything in detail.

The misunderstandings between the gods and the demons. And the phenomenon of the holy relics changing their properties.

The ritual went on for a long time, so there was enough time for Harriet to explain everything to Kono Lint.

Of course, it was still difficult for him to understand or accept the explanation calmly.

"It doesn't make sense…”

"People's beliefs have been wrong all along."

"But it's strange. If there are no demons, then it doesn't make sense for that… demonic power to exist… Is that… That power… Holy power? It's not some kind of dark magic…?"

"Think of it this way, Lint: gods are entirely different beings from what we think. In the first place, the gods might not even be the beings called the Five Great Gods. Those names were given by mortals, after all."

"It… doesn't… make sense…"

Kono Lint didn't have a strong belief in the gods.

However, no one denies the attributes of the gods as beings.

There were the Five Great Gods, and the Demon God Cult emerged.

In fact, even that was wrong, and the name of the Five Great Gods might be incorrect as well, since it was merely a title given in relation to some absolute power. In reality, I learned that the origin of vampires was the gods themselves in Rezaira.

Gods are unknowable beings, and that applies to me as well.

I am unsure if there is such a thing as willpower, and if so, how and when it manifests itself.

Thus, discussing the gods may be a futile endeavor.

All that exists is power, and it simply manifests itself.

Ugh

Kono Lint blankly stared at Tiamata, which emitted ominous darkness.

There was no need for words like "impossible" or "nonsense."

Since such a phenomenon was occurring, it was possible.

What one sees is everything.

"This can't be…"

The power of the Goddes of Purity.

That power manifested as the opposite ability.

Olivia was concentrating her mind, only mumbling something without moving.

For a very long time.

About two hours had passed since Olivia started the ritual.

"Uh… umm…"

Kono Lint tried to yawn but closed his mouth, thinking it wasn't the right time.

Well, we could at least yawn. I feel like yawning, too.

"…Does it always take this long?"

The guy tilted his head.

"Well, rituals tend to be like that."

I've never created a Death Knight myself, and I've never seen Olivia create one.

But when Olivia purified the corrupted Tiamata, it took a whole day.

"Hmm… If it takes this long, it might be a bit difficult in the national cemetery…"

It was Harriet's remark.

"…Indeed."

I didn't expect it to be easy, but if it took too long, we might have to drastically revise our plans.

Here, no one's eyes could see us. But in the national cemetery, who knows when and where someone could see what we were doing.

Even at night, it would be very troublesome if we were caught.

No.

However, from afar, Olivia shook her head, as if she had heard our conversation.

It doesn't usually take this long.

Snap!

Olivia plucked Tiamata, which was stuck in the tombstone floor with a furrowed brow.

"Is it over now?"

Has the Death Knight transformation ended, and it's now embedded in the Demon Sword, or has it been counter-summoned?

As we went down the stairs and asked, Olivia shook her head.

"It hasn't even started."

“…What?"

"There's no reaction at all. No matter how much divine power I pour in, it stays the same."

Olivia stared at the silent graves.

"Did they do something? Whether I purified it with pure divine power or blessed it…”

Olivia hummed and crossed her arms.

"I'm not sure…”

"Is it because too much time has passed since death?"

At Harriet's question, Olivia shook her head.

“…I've heard stories of Death Knights being created from bones by Demon God Cult. Even in cases where everything has decomposed, my divine power should be enough

to scrape together the remnants and forcibly resurrect them."

Olivia's power was immense.

It was strong enough to make the impossible possible. But it didn't work.

Harriet's expression turned puzzled as well.

"Did they prepare for such a situation? I haven't heard anything about it from Charlotte."

"Exactly. Even if Charlotte dislikes us, she wouldn't make Reinhardt take a futile journey."

As a member of the royal family, Charlotte would know something about the royal funeral rites.

If they were prepared for this, she would have definitely mentioned it.

"Could it be that it was too basic to mention? That's possible. Or maybe she had too much faith in my abilities. Hmm… But honestly, I'm confident I could even resurrect the ashes of the cremated… Is this because of the Empire? I wonder if there's some special method I don't know about…"

In the end, it was a failure.

We couldn't revive the corpses in the Hall of Heroes.

"Since these are special people, it might be possible. Anyway, this isn't the end; we can go somewhere else, right?"

Harriet comforted the unusually sullen Olivia.

Harriet was right. This place wasn't our only option. There were countless tombs in the national cemetery.

It was a shame we couldn't revive the heroes of the mausoleum, but there was no point in lingering here.

"W-we're going… to try somewhere else?"

Kono Lint seemed appalled that we had another round of mischief prepared.

"Yeah, you don't have to come along this time. We'd appreciate your help, but it's not necessary."

"N-no… Well… What should I do…”

Kono Lint wouldn't be necessary this time. Though no one could match his help when it came to escaping in case of emergency, it wasn't a palace or temple, so Harriet could handle it too.

Kono Lint seemed to be pondering whether or not to participate in these misdeeds again.

It wasn't grave robbing the royal mausoleum since we tried but failed. There's no need to join in if you don't have to do anything bad, right?

Just as I was about to say that it wouldn't be bad for him to bow out here.

"No matter how I think about it, this is strange."

Olivia said.

"What's strange?"

At my question, Olivia bit her lip.

"It's strange."

Is it hard for her to accept that we failed? There's no one with divine power comparable to Olivia's.

But if the Empire had taken some special measures and prepared countermeasures, what could we do?

"It's strange. This."

Suddenly, Olivia walked somewhere.

Towards the tomb.

"What… What are you doing?"

Harriet's face turned pale as she looked at Olivia standing in front of the tomb.

Olivia crouched down in front of the stone coffin, grabbing the lid with both hands.

The veins on Olivia's forehead bulged.

"Heave!"

-Grrr…

The massive stone coffin lid, which a normal person wouldn't be able to move, began to open with the sound of stone scraping.

Wait, what is she doing?

"Yah! Cha!"

-Grrrr… Thud!

With the sound of stone scraping, Olivia forcibly opened the closed stone coffin.

"I knew it… I had a feeling."

A chilling smile appeared on Olivia's lips as she looked down at the stone coffin.

Then, Olivia turned to face us.

"It's empty."

“…What?"

"?"

"Huh?"

"There's nothing in there."

Curious about what she meant, I approached Olivia and couldn't help but be stunned.

The inside of the stone chamber was completely empty.

There was nothing there.

Kono Lint and Harriet both approached with blank expressions, their faces draining of color when they saw the empty chamber.

Could this be a case like Ragan Artorius?

[Ludena Yen]

[The great hero who stood alone against the darkness of Darkland, protecting tens of thousands, rests here.]

I don't know who this is.

But if it says that they rest here, there should be some remains.

Despite our trio being flabbergasted, Olivia began opening other chamber lids.

-Grrrr!

-Thud!

"Empty too."

-Thud!

"And this one."

-Thud!

"Hmm."

-Thud!

In no time, Olivia had opened five other stone chambers, her expression growing grim.

"They're all empty."

It wasn't that Olivia had failed.

From the beginning, there wasn't a single set of remains to be found.

CHAPTER 556

"They're all empty."

Heroes' Hall, second floor.

Olivia and I opened the various stone coffins and confirmed that the remains were missing.

There were too many coffins to open them all, but it was clear that they would all be empty without checking.

Not only Harriet, but Kono Lint's spirit was gone too.

"This… this must mean…"

Harriet stared at me quietly.

"…The idea we had could be something others thought of as well."

"Yeah…"

Reviving past heroes as undead and using them as a force. Olivia's idea was bizarre and sinister, but ultimately a product of human thought.

There was no rule saying others couldn't have the same idea as us.

"But… for someone else to come in here like we did… and resurrect the corpses before escaping?"

Kono Lint's spirit was drained.

"It's strange that there's no uproar about this yet. Honestly, if it wasn't for my ability, we wouldn't have been able to get in here this easily…"

If the royal tomb had been raided earlier, there should have been a huge commotion.

While we could avoid getting caught, Kono Lint's point that others would surely leave traces behind was true.

"Where's the evidence that it had to be another faction doing this?"

“…What?"

What a foolish child.

"If it was the work of the royal family, there wouldn't be any commotion, would there? Who would know?"

The royal family reviving the remains of the royal tomb as undead.

It's a horrifying thought, but it can't be ruled out as impossible.

Only the royal family can confirm that.

"No way. The empire doing such a thing? Bertus?"

We would do everything we could to survive and win the war, employing all means at our disposal.

So, it's possible that Bertus would make such a choice as well.

"It's not certain yet. We haven't figured out that the empire is controlling the undead."

There might have been other circumstances in the empire, or it might have nothing to do with the undead at all.

It's just a conjecture since the corpses disappeared.

Olivia spoke with a stern expression.

"We need to check the national cemetery."

We can't know what exactly happened at the royal tomb.

But there's no more business for us here.

"This might not be the end."

Olivia had her eyes wide open, as if she was imagining something ominous.

All the stone coffins in the Heroes' Hall were empty.

Technically, we stumbled upon a bizarre incident while planning a major crime.

We don't have a duty to investigate this matter.

But we must find out what happened.

The most likely suspect is the empire.

However, Olivia believed that this might not be the end.

Kono Lint didn't have to accompany us to the national cemetery after we finished our business at the tomb.

But he seemed to want to know the truth about this strange turn of events and followed us.

To be precise, he didn't so much follow us as lead the way with spatial teleportation.

We quickly left the Imperial Palace, and together with Kono Lint, we moved to the national cemetery under the cover of deep night.

As it was night, the cemetery was naturally dark, and there would be no reason for visitors to be in this place at this late hour.

So, while the vast graves were empty, there was a light shining in the chapel.

The priests, administrators, and guards who resided there would still be around.

Though they couldn't enter the Hall of Heroes, there was a tomb area designated for those who had distinguished themselves.

We arrived at the outskirts of the cemetery, where the light and gazes from the

chapel couldn't reach.

"What on earth could be happening…?"

Kono Lint looked fearfully at Olivia, whose expression had grown cold and hard.

"I won't know until I see it with my own eyes."

Olivia began scanning the tombstones in the darkness, one by one.

These were the tombs of fallen warriors.

Though she wouldn't recognize any names, Olivia gazed intently at each tombstone, passing them one by one.

"What are you looking for?"

"Dates."

Olivia replied succinctly to Harriet's question.

Silently scanning the tombstones, Olivia soon stood before one particular grave.

Perhaps she was looking for a tomb that had been buried more recently.

"We'll start the operation. Cover us."

“…Are you sure?"

"We're not doing anything on a large scale. Even if we wanted to get caught, it would be difficult with just one."

Since we were about to undertake a task different from the original plan of a large-scale undead resurrection, concealment would be easy.

There was no one coming and going, but it wouldn't hurt to be cautious.

Harriet cast a series of concealment spells, including invisibility, and Olivia began pouring her corrupt divine power into the tombstone, her hand resting upon it.

Kono Lint glanced at me with a fearful expression.

"Could it be… that you think… even these tombs might all be empty?"

If not only the hero tombs but also the national cemetery's warrior tombs were all empty…

What would become of this situation, and how should we accept it?

His lips trembled.

"I don't know. Nothing's certain until we check for ourselves."

"…”

At my words, Kono Lint hung his head.

How much time had passed?

-Woosh!

The flat, blue grass behind the tombstone began to stir.

The stirring meant something was trying to emerge from the ground.

Could this place be intact?

The fact that something was resurrecting was evidence of that.

"Ah, agh…!"

Kono Lint's face turned pale, and he began to shiver.

-Gulp! Gulp!

-Swoosh!

Soon, the grass stirred, and a bony hand, all that remained of the body, pierced through the earth and revealed itself.

The resurrection of the dead.

To be precise, it was resurrection while still dead.

Kono Lint turned his gaze away from the sight, while I watched the half-revived figure crawling out of the ground, its arm extended.

-Grooooan

With a chilling moan, we soon saw the creature that had crawled out of the ground clearly.

The corpse, buried and decaying in the soil, rose up, wrapped in the black aura of corruption.

Some flesh still clung to it, making the sight even more horrifying.

Kono Lint didn't dare look, and Harriet covered her mouth as if she were about to retch.

Olivia gazed silently at the reanimated corpse.

"Uh… at least the corpses here are… still here, right?"

"It seems so."

Olivia gave a vague response to Harriet's words.

Olivia stared at the skeleton, its hollow eyes staring back at her.

It was nothing more than a rotting body that had come back to life without a soul.

"We'll need to raise a few more to be sure."

For a while, Olivia stared at the revived skeletons, and she briefly muttered.

Instead of a large-scale ritual, Olivia revived the corpses one by one, as if she were stealing in the dead of night.

In total, five.

Considering the size of the entire graveyard, it was a very small number.

"Say something, please. If you know, say you know. If you don't know, say you don't know…”

As Harriet mumbled anxiously, watching Olivia revive the corpses without saying a word and just staring at them blankly.

The revived skeletons mindlessly followed us.

"Go back."

Ignoring Harriet's words, Olivia briefly commanded.

-Grrrrrr

And the skeletons began digging back into the ground from which they had emerged.

"Return everything to its original state. Make sure no one notices the disturbance."

"Huh?"

"Do as I say, I'll explain soon."

Having just revived them, Olivia sent the creatures back to their tombs.

With a dubious expression, Harriet blankly watched as the creatures that had crawled out of the ground started digging to return to their graves.

Harriet used telekinesis magic to bury the disturbed soil and grass, and patched up the torn grass.

Though it wasn't perfect, it was enough to deceive the eye to some extent. Finally, Olivia looked at me.

"I tried five warriors' tombs, but I couldn't create a single Death Knight. What could be the reason?"

Olivia said she had failed five times to create a Death Knight.

This place is a graveyard for those who have achieved military accomplishments, especially warriors.

Not mages or others.

There should have been at least one or two Death Knights, but all had failed.

"It seems like all the corpses have been switched."

It was different from the royal mausoleum.

There were corpses, but there was a possibility that someone else was buried instead of the tomb's owner.

The undead Olivia had painstakingly raised returned to their tombs.

She had brought them back to life, only to let them rest again.

"Every corpse I've revived has been buried after the Gate incident and after the Coalition Army's departure."

Olivia had been reviving corpses based on the date, not their names.

"These were buried relatively recently. According to Uncle Sarkegaar, the Coalition Army mostly cremates corpses. However, the fact that these corpses were buried in the National Cemetery after the Coalition Army's departure means that they are very important people. Important enough to transport them through the Imperial Capital and hold funerals instead of cremation. You understand the meaning, right?"

“…Yes, I understand."

"But it doesn't make sense that I couldn't create a Death Knight with even one of the five corpses buried in the warriors' tombs."

These were the corpses of those who had established military accomplishments, important enough to be transported through the Imperial Capital and buried instead

of being cremated. Their power in life must have been significant.

It should have been optimal conditions for creating Death Knights, as the corpses had not been buried long.

But to Olivia, they seemed subpar.

Of course, it could happen with one or two corpses.

But it had happened five times in a row.

"In conclusion, it's simple. In the National Cemetery, there's no corpse that can be turned into a Death Knight."

Olivia coldly reached her conclusion.

"Is the Empire really creating Death Knights? Does the Empire also have… someone who can wield the power of a necromancer… like you?"

At Kono Lint's words, Olivia shook her head.

"It's not necessary to assume they're Death Knights, but attempting to secure the corpses of those who possessed great power during their lifetime could suggest they're either creating something similar to Death Knights or conducting some sort of experiment. And even without Kier's power, wouldn't it be possible to create undead with strength comparable to that of Death Knights? That's what dark magic is for, isn't it?"

"Ah…"

The process may be different, but the result would be similar.

Even without knowledge of the power of the Demon King, creating undead is possible. Dark magic and Kier's power share similarities, after all.

If we were to create Death Knights using the power of corrupted divine power, the Empire could create them using dark magic.

"As I said, they might not be Death Knights. They could be doing something different than actually creating undead. But the Empire cannot be uninvolved. This place, as

well as the royal mausoleum, are all under the Empire's control, so hoping that it's the work of a third party rather than the Empire would be overly optimistic."

Olivia concludes that the Empire is definitely involved in this situation, and I think so too.

The Empire might be using the corpses of the deceased for creating undead, or for something even more sinister.

What we're trying to do is no different than what the Empire has already done. It's pointless to argue whether it's evil or not.

However, it is shocking.

"That means, the act of repatriating corpses to the imperial capital is more likely a ceremonial act created to secretly use the bodies for other purposes."

“…That's probably true."

The process of honoring the dead and burying them in the imperial mausoleum is a cover-up.

Other bodies are buried while the real corpses are used elsewhere.

Sending the corpses to the imperial capital is already an excuse in and of itself.

"But we've never seen the Empire use an undead army, have we?"

"Right… We've neither seen nor heard of such an army."

Those were the words of Kono Lint and Harriet.

"They must be saving it for later, for when it's needed."

Just as our alliance with the coalition forces would be noticeable, if the coalition forces began using a Death Knight army, it would undoubtedly cause chaos.

It's an army that can't be used unless truly cornered. Olivia looks at me.

"If that were to happen, they'd have a plausible excuse. They could just say it's the

Demon King's army, right? The Empire has too many things they can blame on you."

“…That's true."

Let's say the Empire really needs to deploy a Death Knight unit.

They could just claim it's an unrelated Demon King's army, and that would be that. The coalition forces would panic, but it's better than admitting they're the ones controlling the Death Knight unit.

As Olivia said, most people would simply accept the blame if the Empire blamed all the bad things happening in the world on me.

The Empire is stockpiling power.

The power they've stockpiled, even as they resurrect the corpses of fallen warriors, will only be unleashed in the direst of situations.

Bertus chose the path of resurrecting the corpses of fallen heroes because he now has the excuse of the existence of the Demon King.

It wasn't in the original work, of course. Back then, there was no convenient excuse of a new Demon King. Even if there had been, it wouldn't have been used until the very end.

There's no reason or right to blame. If Bertus hadn't done it, we would have.

However, Kono Lint could not close his mouth in shock, as the Empire was actually doing such a thing with their own hands.

When we do evil deeds, it's no different when the Empire does the same.

"I can't believe it…”

For a while, he just mumbled blankly.

Yes, at least if the Demon King, who is considered an enemy, were to do this, it would be somewhat understandable.

But in this case, it's a betrayal.

While calling those who died for humanity heroes, they're secretly raising the dead as an undead army in preparation for emergency situations.

It doesn't matter if my case becomes known.

I am the Demon King, and it's expected for a villain to create an army of the dead.

In fact, I intended to do such a thing regardless of Bertus's wishes.

When a villain does a villainous act, people ironically get angry but ultimately accept it as human nature.

I might be like that, but the Empire is not.

However, if it becomes known that they're doing such a thing, the Empire will be torn apart.

"Bertus seems to be taking an excessively dangerous gamble."

I couldn't help but say that.

A gamble that is too dangerous, even if it is risky.

But a gamble that must be taken.

"Now we can't reinforce the Death Knights…"

With a complicated expression, Harriet sighed.

Raising dead heroes as an army is not a proper thing to do.

It's fortunate that we didn't do it with our own hands, but it's clear that others are already doing it.

So it's both fortunate and unfortunate.

As Harriet said, we failed in reinforcing the Death Knights and were left with a very awkward suspicion.

At Harriet's words, Olivia shrugged her shoulders.

"No? There's still one more place left."

Huh?

What's she talking about?

"What's left?"

"There was one more place we intended to go. That's where we'll go."

Olivia gently placed her hand on Kono Lint's shoulder.

"Lint, can you help us one last time?"

“…Yes?"

"You'll help us, right?"

"Yes, of course!"

Unfortunately, our Lint was not someone who could refuse such a request.

"Where are we going?"

In response to my question, Olivia squinted her eyes.

"If this is the Empire's doing, then places outside the Empire's influence should still be safe, right?"

"Yes?"

"Ah… no way…”

I didn't understand, but Harriet seemed to get the idea and was flabbergasted.

"The Tomb of the Saints."

The Tomb of the Saints.

Naturally, the tomb managed by the Holy Knight Order and the Five Great Religions

would be beyond the reach of the Empire's influence.

In the case of someone like Charlotte, she must have thought that we would loot the Hall of Heroes, and even if Bertus had created Death Knights, he wouldn't have touched the royal family's remains.

But the Tomb of the Saints.

I can't mention it directly, but it's obvious what's there.

"Is, is it… is it okay to do that?"

Olivia's stepfather.

The former commander of the Holy Knight Order and the man who died by my hand.

From my perspective, he died as a villain, but he is known to have honorably perished while fighting the Demon King.

Surely, the tomb of Riverrier Lanze must be there as well?

"I couldn't fulfill my filial duty while he was alive, so I'll take this chance to do so."

Olivia smiled brightly, and we were left bewildered in the face of that smile.

CHAPTER 557

The Tomb of the Saints was located beneath the headquarters of the Holy Knights.

Just like the majority of the allied forces, the Holy Knights and the Five Great Religions had also dedicated all their resources to this war.

Consequently, the Holy Knights' headquarters was operating with a minimum number of personnel.

Naturally, there were no defenses like those found at the Imperial Palace or the Temple at the Holy Knights' headquarters.

Besides, I wasn't an undead, so it wasn't impossible for me to enter.

Thus, compared to the Imperial Palace or the Temple, infiltrating the Holy Knights' headquarters was relatively easier.

The place we needed to go, the Tomb of the Saints, was bound to be an area with minimal human presence.

Initially, the infiltration was already easy, but with Kono Lint accompanying us with a "let's see this through to the end" attitude, entering the Tomb of the Saints was practically effortless.

"Damn, I really don't know what's right anymore."

When Kono Lint had to forcefully help us, he must have had doubts about whether it was the right thing to do.

But now that he knew the Empire was doing something like this first, his judgment of good and evil seemed utterly meaningless.

The one who does wrong first is the rightful owner of the deed.

And so, Kono Lint ultimately decided to help us create a Death Knight in the Tomb of the Saints for the third time.

"It's not as grand as the Royal Mausoleum, but this place is still quite impressive."

The Tomb of the Saints.

Located beneath the Holy Knights' headquarters, the tomb was not as vast as the Royal Mausoleum, but it was still filled with a dignified and solemn atmosphere.

The overall ambiance was different from the Royal Mausoleum.

On the giant walls of the tomb, the divine titles of the gods that the deceased saints had served were engraved at regular intervals, along with the names and brief histories of the deceased saints.

It was almost like a memorial hall.

The ashes of the deceased saints must be inside those walls.

It felt like a columbarium with coffins instead of urns.

The coffins within the walls were arranged in over ten vertical layers.

However, the spacing was quite wide, so the coffins at the very top were almost seven meters high.

The tombs of the great saints, however, were not on the walls but on the ground, with their tombstones erected and coffins buried behind them.

"The history of the Holy Knights is not very long. So there aren't many saintly ashes."

"Would there be more tombs in the Basilica of the Five Great Religions?"

"Yes, but except for the Basilica of Als in the Imperial Capital, the rest of them have likely been destroyed, so it's pointless."

The Holy Knights were created for the Great Demon War, and their history wasn't very long. Thus, there were more saintly ashes in the other Basilicas.

"Still, as the history is short, most of the saints admitted to the tomb were chosen for their military achievements, not their theological accomplishments. So, we can probably secure more Death Knights from here. I don't think we need to go to the

Basilica of Als."

Those who died in the Great Demon War.

Those who died due to the Gate incidents.

In the end, their achievements were based on their combat, so most of the Holy Knights' saints would be priests or paladins.

Although the absolute number of saints was small, their ashes would be true to the purpose of creating Death Knights.

"Make sure you block the entrance well. It'll be a headache if someone comes in and sees us."

"Yes."

At the massive entrance to the underground tomb. Harriet takes on the role of guarding the door.

"Reinhardt, can you check? It'll be troublesome if there's no corpse this time either."

"Yes."

I head towards the shared wall and place my hand on the entrance to the sealed stone coffin.

The stone coffin has no handle because there's no reason to open it once it's been pushed into the wall.

If there's no corpse this time, the problem becomes much more complicated.

-Grrrr! Thud!

I break the stone coffin embedded in the wall with my bare hands and check inside.

"It's here."

"Good, that means the Holy Knights have never participated in this undead game."

It was quite strange that no one was surprised by me breaking the stone wall with my bare hands. Kono Lint was no exception.

Anyway.

The moment it was confirmed that the empire was the cause of the disappearing corpses, it was clear that the allied forces were not involved. Otherwise, the tombs of the saints would be empty.

What's happening now is the empire's unilateral action.

In the end, we confirmed that the corpse was still intact this time.

-Clang!

Olivia stands in the center and plunges the Demon Sword Tiamata into the ground.

"Alright, let's really get started."

-Woowoowooong!

The power of corruption begins to seep out from the Demon Sword.

There will be no failure this time.

Olivia had said from the beginning that it wouldn't take long.

It only took a while because we didn't know that there were no corpses in the royal tomb.

Still, it was not something that could be done in a short amount of time.

About 30 minutes after Olivia began the ritual.

-Thump thump

A heavy, pounding sound, as if something was striking the wall, could be heard.

"Uh… Uh…"

Kono Lint shudders and slowly clings to me.

Yeah, it was a moment that would make anyone nervous.

As if something was starting this time, strange vibrations continued from the wall of the saints' tomb.

A sound like something was hitting it.

-Thud thud

Gray dust mixed with stone powder rises from the wall, and the vibrations are felt even on the shared ceiling.

The stone statues and symbols of the gods tremble.

-Thump! Thump!

The vibrations from the wall begin to intensify.

The slow tremors gradually become faster.

-Thump! Thump! Thump! Crack!

And the stone coffin embedded in the wall, the square tombstone, and the lid simultaneously begin to crack.

-Bang!

With a burst of dust and dirt, a lid flies off, and something crawls out from the wall.

The bones of the saint, who had been resting in peace while embedded in the wall, emerge.

-Grrrr

With pitch-black darkness oozing from its hollow eye sockets and all over its body, the bones squeeze out of the narrow room and fall to the ground.

-Thump!

The body, which was nothing more than bones, crashes to the ground and slowly gets up.

One corpse has been resurrected, and the skeletal saint, with black energy flowing from its body, stands still.

-Grrrrrrrr

The skeleton, growling in a strange voice, wakes up and slowly walks towards Olivia.

The pitch-black energy flowing from its body soon becomes a cloak of darkness, covering the skeleton from head to toe.

A skeleton clad in darkness.

The most powerful undead.

The resurrected saint, now a Death Knight, kneels before Olivia.

"Good…”

-Thump thump

-Thump!

Like a bird trying to break out of its egg, the sound of beings awakening from slumber and striking the stone coffins filled the tomb.

The ritual took an hour and a half to complete.

Seventy-five in total.

Now, seventy-five Death Knights had been resurrected.

There were certainly some that didn't rise.

However, the corrupted bones of the saints who had become Death Knights were clearly before our eyes.

The underground tomb was hazy with the stone dust rising from the shattered coffins.

Thanks to Harriet's noise-canceling, no priests had detected the disturbance and come to investigate.

There was no intention of restoring anything.

After all, we were to leave this place and never return.

The Holy Knights would surely be furious when they discovered that nearly half of the saints' tombs had been destroyed, but it was none of our concern since we had already achieved our goal.

This wouldn't be enough.

But securing a sufficient number of Death Knights was impossible from the start. In this war, a sufficient number of forces was an unreachable figure to begin with.

Death Knights essentially took the form of skeletons.

Scars from their lives, or missing parts, had been reconstructed by the power of corruption.

-Grrrrrr

Death Knights, emitting strange low rumblings, had no sense of self from their previous lives.

They were merely empty shells.

Olivia approached one of the numerous Death Knights.

We all watched the scene in silence.

One of the seventy-five Death Knights. Behind it was the tomb of Riverrier Lanze.

Olivia placed her hand on the cheekbone of the Death Knight, which was dripping with the dark energy of corruption.

"You've suffered a lot."

We looked on, appalled, as the corners of Olivia's mouth twisted into a creepy smile.

The Death Knight, being nothing but a shell, was not Riverrier Lanze.

It was merely what had once been Riverrier Lanze.

The one who had been close to immortal, met his end by my hand, pierced by the Demonic Sword Tiamata.

And now, he had been brought back from death by his daughter's Demonic Sword Tiamata.

Olivia, wearing a sinister smile, stared intently at the dark, smoky tears streaming from the empty eye sockets of the Death Knight.

When she had said that we needed more Death Knights, it was clear that Olivia had intended to resurrect Riverrier Lanze.

The resurrected Death Knights melded into the smoke and were absorbed into the Demonic Sword, and we escaped the saints' tomb.

"Is this… the end?"

"It seems like we could go to the Basilica of Als, but I don't think there's much meaning to it. There will only be ancient, useless bones."

As if there was no need to do more work just to secure one or two more Death Knights, Olivia shook her head at Kono Lint's question.

Our business in the Imperial Capital was finished.

“…Can we leave now?"

"How about it? Shall I take you to the Allied Forces camp?"

"No, I can find my way back on my own."

He had been forced to help with something that he would never have experienced in his life, being entangled with the Demon King people.

However, Kono Lint carried a larger doubt than witnessing the grotesque process of creating Death Knights.

The suspicion that the Empire itself might be doing something like this, or even worse.

Everything had become unclear.

"Just so you know, don't try to dig too deep into this matter."

"…"

It seemed that I had hit the mark, as Kono Lint couldn't respond to my words.

"Even if your abilities are optimized for infiltration, there's no need to take unnecessary risks. And besides, there's nothing you can do about it even if you find out."

"…You're right."

This was the kind of matter that should not be known.

If he tried to figure out what was happening on his own and got caught by the Empire, even stranger things might occur.

"Anyway, you've worked hard."

If it weren't for Kono Lint, things would have been much more complicated, but they progressed smoothly and quickly.

It was fortunate that everything ended swiftly and neatly without any conflicts with the wrong people.

Kono Lint remained silent for a moment, then cautiously opened his mouth.

It seemed like he was debating whether to say it or not, but finally decided to share the story.

"Do you know about the kids in our class?"

"I have a rough idea."

"…"

The people who died in this battle and the injured Ludwig.

Although it was like informing me that he was scouting the Allied Forces, there was no reason to pretend I didn't know. I would have known that he was gathering information on the Allied Forces from the beginning.

Seeing that sorrow, Kono Lint might have thought that he had to prevent someone else from dying in this war, even if it meant relying on an unjust power.

But was it right to use the deaths of those killed in the war? It would be complicated to determine if the Empire itself should be doing this.

To prevent someone's death, they created Death Knights, but they also turned someone who was already dead into a Death Knight.

“…It's enough that you know."

Kono Lint didn't speak explicitly about that sadness and regret.

We didn't really have a conversation either.

It was simply a sad, horrible, and cruel topic.

Now it was time to go back.

However, Kono Lint didn't leave, and his complexion paled as if he realized something while looking at me.

"Hey, but you… it seems like you'll keep calling me like this whenever you need me…

Is that my imagination?"

"You know it well."

"Why! I hate this! I'm with the Allied Forces!"

"Weren't you already on our side?"

You're already an accomplice! There's no way out!

At my forceful statement, his complexion grew even paler.

"Get lost! I won't help you anymore, even if someone asks me to! I won't fall for it again!"

Pop!

Kono Lint disappeared with a resentful expression, teleporting away. With his abilities, he could quickly travel from here to the far-off Allied Forces' base.

If Kono Lint loses his humanity, it will be all my fault.

“…Will we need Lint again next time?"

Harriet tilts her head.

"Well, I don't know. But I'm sure he'll fall for the same pattern again. Definitely."

"Come on, no way. He'll suspect that it's just Uncle Sarkegaar."

Olivia tilted her head as if to say that Kono Lint couldn't be that foolish.

"Really? I think he'll follow us even if he knows it's Sarkegaar."

"Ah."

"Ah."

Seeing how resigned he was, he might follow us later, thinking that it wouldn't be so bad if he could become a pretty girl.

He might be getting used to the idea that it might not be so bad after all since he's been fooled so many times!

I'm sorry, Lint.

It seems like I've ruined you.

"By the way, wouldn't it be good to check what's happening in the Empire?"

"True. Although it might not be dangerous for us, we should still know what they're up to."

Harriet and Olivia's opinions were reasonable.

Although I told Kono Lint not to investigate on his own, our situation was a bit different.

We don't necessarily need to interfere in the Empire's affairs, nor do we intend to.

However, we need to know what they're doing.

"We'll find out eventually."

With Sarkegaar and me present, we will gather information and find out what they're up to.

As early as tomorrow, the headquarters of the Holy Knights Order will be in chaos.

Our work in the Imperial Capital is finished.

"Speaking of which, I had a thought…"

When Olivia tried to secure a Death Knight from the tomb in the basement of the Holy Knights Order's headquarters, I thought of a potential location.

"Wouldn't there be a cemetery or something similar in the Demon King's Castle?"

The very Demon King's Castle.

Like the Imperial Palace, wouldn't there be a tomb or something similar for past

heroes or high-ranking demons in the Demon King's Castle?

"Why are you asking us… Oh right, you don't have any memories."

Harriet reacted as if wondering why the Demon King would ask us about it.

"It's worth checking out."

“…But Reinhardt, you accused me of doing strange things, yet you're thinking the same way, aren't you?"

Right?

When I think about it, Olivia revived her foster father as a Death Knight, but I'm even worse, aren't I?

What if I resurrect the ancient Demon Kings as undead, using them for my own purposes?

I had such a despicable thought.

We headed to the Demon King's Castle in Darkland for the last time.

However, there was no tomb for the past Demon Kings in the Demon King's Castle.

Whether there had been tombs that were already destroyed, or if there were no tombs at all from the beginning, we couldn't tell.

Fortunately or unfortunately, in the end, we couldn't secure a Death Knight from the Demon King's Castle.

CHAPTER 558

Although we had harbored some expectations for our journey to the Demon King's Castle, we ultimately returned empty-handed.

However, we managed to secure seventy-five Death Knights, which, according to Olivia, are of the highest quality.

These Death Knights are far more powerful than the ones we had previously encountered.

Though they may not be the war heroes of the Empire, the heroes of the Knight Order who were promoted to become Saints should not be underestimated.

After returning to Edina, we shared the results of our operation with the Elders' Council and other relevant parties.

"The tombs were empty?"

"Well, not all of them. But it seemed that most of the tombs in the Hall of Heroes were empty."

Naturally, Charlotte's reaction was the most horrified.

Upon hearing that the Empire appeared to be doing the very thing we intended to do, Charlotte could not close her gaping mouth.

"What on earth are they planning…?"

"They'll probably use that force when they reach their limit. We can't know when that will be."

It's an incredibly powerful army, but using it would undoubtedly have significant side effects.

Unless faced with a truly desperate situation, Bertus would not deploy that army.

Ideally, it would be best if that force never had to be used.

A cornered rat will bite a cat, and cornered humanity will do whatever it takes.

Even if it means spitting on the ethics and morals established thus far.

In order to survive, one must be willing to do anything, and this is just one example of that.

I had expected it to take several days, but surprisingly, everything was wrapped up in just one day.

This was partly due to unforeseen circumstances and also thanks to Kono Lint's assistance.

After sharing the situation, Harriet, Olivia, and I had a late dinner together.

Harriet quickly finished her meal and left to visit Lucinil, saying she would learn about soul manipulation techniques from her over the winter.

"Sis, you should go rest too."

"I don't get to do this often, so I want to stay with you a bit longer. Is that okay?"

Olivia tilted her head cutely, asking if it was okay.

Even when she was blatantly acting cute, she still looked adorable.

As much as I thought I would get used to this behavior, I never really did.

"Well, alright."

"Shall we go up there? To that place you often visit."

I had planned on taking a walk, but Olivia seemed to have a specific place in mind.

Olivia and I climbed to the top of the tower with warm tea in our cups.

From this place, I often looked down at Edina. When I had nothing better to do, I would spend my time here, lost in thought. Of course, such occasions were rare.

-Wooosh!

As it was winter and we were up high, a cold wind blew at the top of the tower.

"Wow, it's chilly."

We weren't greatly affected by the cold, but it was still inescapable.

Olivia took a sip of her tea and shivered.

"It would be so pretty if it snowed, right?"

Olivia gazed down at the landscape of Lazak in the winter night, making that comment.

"People would only struggle more in the snow. Wouldn't it be better if it didn't snow?"

"Maybe so?"

If it snowed, people would suffer even more due to the frozen ground.

Olivia gazes at me with a subtle glance.

“…Why?"

"No, it's just that I find it interesting you'd think that way."

"…”

I supposed so.

Instead of thinking about how beautiful the scenery would become when it snows, I pondered how people's lives would change when snow falls.

At some point, did I lose my sense of appreciation and only think about practical matters?

I am not fit to be a king, and I have indeed abandoned that role, but I cannot help my transformed mindset.

"You were originally an Archdemon, so maybe it's natural for you to think that way?"

“…Maybe?"

"It's strange."

Olivia sits beside me, resting her head on my shoulder.

"Looking back on it, you hid so much during your time in the temple."

“…I'm sorry."

"I'm not saying this to receive an apology. I'm just saying… it was like that."

"…”

Back then, everything was a lie.

Those lies shaped the situation and relationships, and they created this world.

"I feel like the you from the temple days is the real you."

"…”

"This Reinhardt who became the Demon King… somehow feels fake."

Olivia looks up at me with a faint gaze.

"There are no secrets now, but you, who have lost all secrets, feel even more like a fake."

"Whatever."

"As if you're trying to force it somehow."

"As if you're trying to wear clothes that don't fit you. That's how it seems."

"You're the Demon King, so this should be your true nature."

"I don't know."

"I think you would have been better off just being Reinhardt."

"Bad-tempered."

"Rough-spoken."

"Violent, but…"

"When someone asks for help, even if you scowl, you eventually end up helping anyone."

"I think that Reinhardt is your true self."

"I think living like that, just going on without any problems, would have been better."

"Like now."

"Only thinking about the pain and trying to endure it… you seem…"

"Sad."

The essence of being the Demon King.

It seemed Olivia knew that it didn't suit me at all.

I wore a mask in the temple, and my current appearance should be my true self.

In a way, Olivia's words were right: everything during my time with a false name should be fake, and everything now, with my true name, should be real.

But my real self was in the temple, and this current appearance is just a fake, forcibly imitating something else.

I can't be the Demon King, nor a king.

But I have to be, so I'm forcing myself to do it.

It was exactly what I usually thought.

Everything was burdensome because I was trying to force myself into clothes that don't fit.

I wasn't entirely thoughtless, but my self in the temple was closer to my true self.

"That might be true."

At my simple replied, Olivia giggled.

"Did I seem really crazy today?"

“…It's a problem that you don't think you are, usually."

"What?"

Olivia narrows her eyes in a challenging way.

No, you're right!

You're always crazy!

Not knowing that was even stranger! That's even crazier!

And the fact that I even suggested going to the Demon King's castle makes me a madman too…

"Ugh, you're only harsh to me. You're not like that with the brat, Charlotte, Ellen even more so. You know you're always admiring them, tolerating them, and forgiving them, while only treating me like this? It hurts my feelings, you know? Want me to tell you everything that's piled up till now? Go on, tell me you want it.”

“…I'm sorry."

"But do you know that?"

Olivia suddenly wrapped her arms around my waist.

"You know, I don't actually mind it that much?"

"Why, why is that?"

"Because I think you're the most comfortable around me. And honestly, I kind of like that."

I accepted that her slight roughness came from her being closer to me.

"It might not be true, but thinking that way makes me feel a little better."

"Uh, what kind of rhythm should I follow?"

I can't figure out what to say as her expression shifts from sullen to cheerful to gloomy.

"I'm trying, you know. Trying not to be upset."

"…"

I have a lot to apologize to Olivia for.

Even though she has plenty of reasons to be upset, she still tries not to be.

Olivia once said that even if the whole world abandoned me, she would stand by my side, and she has kept her word.

Though the whole world hasn't abandoned me, the fact that Olivia is my eternal ally hasn't changed.

"Actually, it's kind of weird for me to be upset after you've saved my life so many times, isn't it?"

"But I've saved you too, haven't I?"

"That's a separate matter."

Isn't that something you say in the opposite situation?

When my identity as the Demon King was discovered, Olivia used her status and

influence to cause a commotion and try to save me. And it undoubtedly had an effect.

Of course, there were various incidents that led Olivia to realize I was the Demon King.

The lingering question of why the Demon King killed Riverrier Lanze and facilitated her own escape.

Once that was resolved, it was inevitable that she would trust me more after learning I was the Demon King.

In Ellen and Charlotte's case, it was a situation where they could only feel betrayed, while Olivia was the opposite.

"Actually, the fact that you couldn't attend the Miss Temple Contest because of me, looking back on it now, it was a rather pleasant incident."

"No, your life was at stake! How could I attend the Miss Temple Contest in such a situation?"

In the end, I couldn't see Ellen in a dress, but the gravity of the situation was incomparable.

Even if I went back to that time, I wouldn't have been able to attend the Miss Temple Contest, since I would have chosen to save Olivia and Adriana.

"Anyway, you came to me. That's what's important."

Olivia tightened her embrace around my waist.

"Looking back, you couldn't have defeated my stepfather at that time, right? Reinhardt, you didn't have any hidden strength or anything like that."

"That's right."

People on my side naturally knew that I didn't have any hidden strength in the Temple.

I was genuinely powerless. Most of the power and skills I've gained were indeed cultivated at the Temple.

Olivia has never actually seen me fight.

"How did you win?"

"I used the Demon Sword."

He was not only unharmed by the storm of fire and lightning but he was also a monster that regenerated even when his heart was pierced.

If I hadn't used the Demon Sword Tiamata, there would have been no way to kill Riverrier Lanze.

"Hmm, even if you used that, it wouldn't have been enough to beat him."

That's also true.

I should not have been able to defeat Riverrier Lanze. Of course, there were many factors and assistance that contributed to my victory, and it wasn't just me fighting alone.

But even with the demonic sword in my hand, Riverrier Lanze was an enemy I should not have been able to face.

"Well, it all worked out somehow, didn't it?"

Somehow, it had all come together like this.

There was nothing more to say.

In the end, I went to face an enemy I should not have been able to face. And I won.

It was reckless, but I somehow managed.

I risked my life to save Olivia and Adriana. At my words, Olivia sighed deeply.

"You're a strange one."

"Like you're one to talk."

"Fine, you did something for me, so I'll put up with your annoying behavior."

Saying it was all because I saved her, Olivia hugged me even tighter.

The topic of Riverrier Lanze shouldn't come up between the two of us. After all, I killed Olivia's stepfather.

But the situation was rather peculiar.

Olivia had no choice but to hate her stepfather.

She even went so far as to resurrect his own corpse as a Death Knight.

"No matter how I think about it, you and your stepfather have some bad karma. Right?"

“…Well, looking back, that guy messed with me from the beginning to the end."

"It's almost a wonder, isn't it?"

Riverrier Lanze, the Holy Knight Commander.

He was demoted from his position because of the truth I uncovered.

Then, he tried to use Olivia as a puppet for his Thousand-Year Empire, and died by my hand.

Now, he had risen as a Death Knight and had to fight for us.

What a twisted fate.

At this point, even if Riverrier Lanze came back from the dead and put a knife to my throat, I wouldn't have anything to say.

I was not only responsible for ruining his life, but also for using him even in death.

"But it's absurd that all this would have never happened if you hadn't messed with me."

"Isn't that so?"

My entanglement with Riverrier Lanze was all because of Olivia.

I saved her twice and once at her request.

A ridiculous and eerie connection.

Riverrier Lanze was, of course, not a good father. If he had been, he would not have died by my hand in the first place, and Olivia would not have turned him into a Death Knight.

Being forced to be a good child, and to live up to expectations, was Olivia's life.

She lived a life where sacrificing herself for others was taken for granted.

Of course, Olivia was no longer such a person.

The person who was once called the Saint of Eredian has become twisted through various events.

She's become selfish, violent, foul-mouthed, and even suggested committing horrible acts without any hesitation.

"My father wanted a Thousand-Year Empire. You know?"

"He did. He wanted to make the Holy Knights the core force and completely separate the Church's power from the Empire."

"I didn't want any part of that. It was disgusting. I lost interest in gods and all that, so why did he try to force that on me?"

Olivia gazed down at the landscape of Lazak quietly.

"But ironically, after my father died and the world started to fall apart, I ended up becoming the leader of the United Holy Church, which combines the beliefs of the Five Great Religions and the Demon God Cult."

"…"

“I find it strange sometimes, that I now willingly do what I once refused, when my father tried to force it upon me.”

"Do you dislike doing it?"

"I'm not sure if I dislike it, but I don't particularly enjoy it either."

Olivia looked at me.

"It's similar to you playing the part of the Demon King."

I didn’t like it, but I did it because I have to.

It's not forced upon me.

Both Olivia and I were doing things we don't particularly want to do, but we have to.

It's like trying to force oneself into clothes that don't fit.

"Sometimes, I think that at this rate, we might end up going to war with the Empire, either destroying or absorbing the Five Great Religions, and becoming the ruler of the Five Great Religions. What do you think?"

It wouldn't be called the Thousand-Year Empire.

But it was what Riverrier Lanze wished for Olivia.

Somehow, Olivia was getting closer to that goal.

Would it really be possible to establish a new faith in this land?

Olivia Lanze, who would rule over it all.

It wasn't impossible for Olivia to become something like the first Holy Emperor of that world.

"I wonder how happy my father would have been if he were alive to see this?"

Olivia said.

It was a terrible joke, not a single bit of sincerity in it.

"Please stop talking nonsense…”

"Why? Isn't it a common story for someone to not understand their parents'

intentions and disobey them while they're alive, but come to their senses after their parents have passed away?"

"Exactly, so please stop…"

No matter what, my sister was definitely not a filial daughter!

Even if Riverrier Lanze was a garbage-like father, that doesn't mean my sister becomes a filial daughter! If anything, she's worse now!

"Anyway."

Olivia wrapped her arm around mine.

"It's cold."

As she said, the wind was chilly.

The 12th month.

It would only get colder.

No matter how much our strength was enhanced, it could never be enough.

But we had completed the first phase of our power enhancement, and we began to solidify our foundations in preparation for the next advance of the Allied Forces.

Olivia seemed to be considering ways to strengthen the already created Death Knights or permanently turn monsters into undead with the Holy Order's priests and knights.

Charlotte was still handling administrative affairs and focusing on the management of Edina's government. Harriet continued her usual magical research, sometimes alone and sometimes with Lucinil.

And if I wasn't doing dream training with Airi, I had nothing else to do in Edina.

Charlotte already knew more about Edina than I did and had become my perfect

superior, so I thought I might be a hindrance if I stayed.

That's why I arrived at the Allied Forces' base to undertake my next task.

-Meow

As a black cat.

To see for myself what had changed and how.

To understand the current state of affairs.

I had to verify it with my own eyes.

CHAPTER 559

Though it would be possible to stay in the form of a kitten forever, that would be unnatural.

The onlookers couldn't help but wonder why this creature never seemed to grow.

So, every time it appeared, it had grown a little bit.

"It's alive, this little one."

The guards stationed at the Royal Class garrison had grown familiar with the kitten.

"Quite a clever one, hiding and following us around like that."

Indeed.

This charade couldn't continue until the end of the war.

As the guards had pointed out, this army wasn't stationed in a fixed location and the battles with countless casualties continued.

A cat that somehow survived and reappeared was quite a suspicious existence.

Quite some time had passed since the end of the Serandia occupation battle.

Naturally, the atmosphere at the Royal Class garrison was still subdued.

Three had died in the last battle, and with the Royal Class being few in number, the empty spaces left by the deceased were significant.

Delphin Izzard.

Like Ludwig, she was a kind and good-hearted person.

According to Sarkegaar's report, both Scarlett and Ludwig were in danger, and Delphin died trying to save them.

Any death would be regrettable, but Delphin's death was particularly devastating.

After all, she was the most described character in the original work.

Elemental magic is very powerful, but in an instant, one could lose their life, and this situation made it all too real that there were no exceptions.

Even if I had foreseen my future death after the battle with Ellen, if I let go and waited for death in the next battle, I would die.

Changing the future is easy.

It's just difficult to change it to the desired future.

I had to check on Ellen's condition, but for now, I planned to wander around the Royal Class garrison.

The first classmate I encountered in the garrison was Cliffman.

"…"

Within the Royal Class, there were those who were obsessed with the cat and those who weren't.

Ludwig, Cliffman, and Redina were among those who showed no interest. To be precise, they belonged to the group that ignored the cat.

As if they had no room in their hearts or minds to care for such a small creature.

But now, Cliffman stared at the cat he had ignored all this time.

“…You're alive."

He then gently bowed his head and stroked my head once.

His gesture, seemingly relieved, felt loaded with meaning.

He then left without saying anything else.

He didn't seem to think that more important people should have survived instead of

such a small creature.

As a cat, I tend to engage in dual thinking.

I'm not the cat; I'm just borrowing its form.

So when someone strokes me, I think they're stroking the cat, not me.

If I don't think like that, I won't be able to stand people touching me all the time.

I try to think that I'm just borrowing the cat's form and that the cuteness belongs to the cat, not me.

Of course.

Dual thinking, as it is, amounts to nothing more than sophistry.

I just feel like I'd go insane from self-loathing if I don't think that way.

As Kono Lint put it, I must be a pervert.

Seeing the beast transform like this, it's truly a bizarre pervert even among perverts.

Naturally, not everyone stationed at the Royal Class is a former classmate of mine.

There are seniors and juniors as well. Although the atmosphere is somewhat gloomy, they seemed happy to see me (the cat) after such a long time.

Honestly, when I'm in cat form, the most troublesome thing isn't being stroked by someone or having my paws touched constantly.

"Are you hungry? Eat this."

-…

They keep trying to feed me something.

I'm not really a beast, you know!

I don't particularly want to eat something like warm milk!

Do you have any idea how humiliating it is to stick my head into a plate and eat like that?

Real cats probably don't think about that, but I do!

"Aren't you hungry?"

-Meow

Moreover, there are those who offer me their leftovers from the dining tent.

It's annoying.

I've had to close my eyes and eat it a few times, fearing that if I refuse, they might say I'm a wild animal with a refined palate.

It's a struggle having to act like a beast when transformed into one.

Amidst the overall gloomy atmosphere, I wandered around the Royal Class garisson.

“Are you resting?”

“You never know when we'll need it. We should charge it up as much as possible. We haven't even filled half of it yet.”

“What's the hurry? We're going to be here until winter ends anyway.”

In the distance, I could see Redina and Cayer arguing.

What was different now was that the situation seemed reversed somehow.

I had seen Redina always nagging Cayer about charging the Arc Crystal, and I knew their relationship was quite bad.

“There are still monsters out there. You were the one who said we should always keep it charged since we don't know when we'll need it.”

“No, I mean, how many times do I have to say I was wrong? Why do you have to be

like that…? I admit I made a mistake…”

“How many times do I have to tell you that this isn't because you did something wrong to me? Why can't you understand?”

“I know… I know, but there's no need to rush like that. Why can't you understand me either?”

However, now the situation was odd, with Redina trying to stop Cayer from doing his task.

“I can handle it, you know. It's not always too much. Just leave me alone.”

“Ah…”

In the end, Redina, with tearful red eyes, started crying, and Cayer left her alone, walking off somewhere.

"That bastard is at it again."

As I turned my head at the sound coming from the side, Kono Lint was standing there with his arms crossed, clicking his tongue.

He looked down at me and then picked me up.

"Where have you been hiding all this time?"

…This isn't something you say to Reinhardt, is it?

He probably hasn't realized that I can transform into a beast, right?

Even if he did, honestly, it wouldn't make much of a difference.

The only change would be Reinhardt, the perverted Demon King, becoming Reinhardt, the crazy perverted Demon King.

Kono Lint stared at me intently.

As if he was thinking about something.

You're an idiot, right?

A total idiot.

“…Ugh."

He muttered something inexplicable and then put me down.

After walking alone for a while, he looked back at me.

-Meow

I tilted my head in response.

-… Ugh.

The rascal hesitated once more and then left.

As it seemed like he had some sense, but in the end, he didn't. He was a fool after all.

Of course, there were those who paid attention to the cat, but it wasn't like it used to be.

There were people who were relieved that this small creature was still alive, but inevitably, they could only imagine those who had disappeared with such thoughts.

The Royal Class garrison wasn't just barracks and dining halls, of course.

-Kaang!

“…Can we try it one more time?"

“…Yes."

I watched Ludwig picking up the fallen sword at the outdoor training ground of the Royal Class garrison.

His opponent was Scarlett.

With an awkward smile, Ludwig grabbed the sword with his left hand and took his stance.

"Sorry, I'm not used to this."

"…"

Ludwig was practicing with a left-handed sword.

I didn't think he'd give up easily, but was he trying to find a breakthrough in a situation where he only had his left arm?

Scarlett looked at Ludwig with a tearful expression.

"Ludwig, I can help you as much as you need. I can do more. But…"

"Even with only one arm, I can still use Magic Body Strengthening."

Ludwig wasn't wrong. In that state, he would still have combat abilities far beyond an ordinary soldier. Losing an arm didn't change the fact that he was a superhuman.

But due to Moonshine, Delphin Izzard had also become a superhuman.

And yet, Delphin had died.

In a battle where anyone could die, Ludwig would likely die with a high probability in that state.

It was no different from a suicide attempt.

"Ludwig, I'll fight for both of us. It's because of me… It's because of me that you're like this. Delphin too…"

"No, it's not."

As Scarlett was about to burst into tears, Ludwig firmly shook his head.

"No, it's not your fault."

"…"

"It's my fault. It's all because I was weak."

It was an odd statement.

If Delphin's death wasn't Scarlett's fault, then it shouldn't be Ludwig's fault either.

But Ludwig was blaming everything on himself.

A pathological level of self-loathing.

Had Ludwig succumbed to it as well?

"I'm sorry, I didn't think about how this would be a burden on you, Scarlett. I'm sorry…"

"No, it's not. It's okay."

"I'll do it alone, it's not like I need swordsmanship for this kind of fight anyway. It's not about skill when it comes to killing monsters."

Saying that being able to wield a weapon with his left hand was more important than needing skill.

Ludwig, holding his sword with his left hand, began to practice Magic Body Strengthening alone.

Scarlett had offered to help, but Ludwig had refused, saying it would be better for her to focus on her personal training.

In the end, Scarlett left the training ground, wiping tears from the corners of her eyes.

Responsibility.

Guilt.

It was heartbreaking and pitiful to see those who shared such feelings from afar.

Ludwig wasn't the only one on the training ground.

There were many other people, both seniors and juniors, who were practicing duels, Magic Body Strengthening, and other things, all diligently working on their tasks.

I sat in a corner of the training ground, watching Ludwig.

"Hup!"

-Kwoong!

Not only the sword in his left hand but also his kicks and heavy blows were part of his training.

The training of the superhumans was no ordinary affair, and the straw dummies they practiced on were not ordinary either. These special dummies were designed to withstand powerful blows and physical force.

-Thud! Bang!

"Kuh!"

-Collapse!

However, it seemed as though Ludwig couldn't properly maintain his balance, as he stumbled and fell, trying to swing his sword only to have it bounce back and hit him in the head.

Ludwig was right-handed.

But, ultimately, swords are often used with both hands, especially in battles against monsters.

Having lost his dominant hand, he could no longer use two-handed sword techniques.

Losing an arm is not a trivial matter.

It's not just that he lost half his combat ability, but most of it.

In essence, Ludwig had lost almost everything, but he continued to struggle with just his left hand, using what remained of his abilities.

-Bang!

A loud noise echoed. The noise did not only come from the dummy Ludwig was hitting.

However, his seniors looked at Ludwig with a slightly bored expression.

Despite sustaining injuries severe enough to be crippled, Ludwig's persistence while covered in cold sweat must have been chilling to witness.

Ludwig was fundamentally diligent.

This had been evident from the beginning of his enrollment.

But could one call it diligence when he lost an arm and continued to strike the dummy in an effort to fight more?

This was not diligence, but madness.

Ludwig was a superhuman, surpassing ordinary human limitations.

But in the end, he was like a cart with one wheel missing.

-Bang!

"Kuh!"

He kept falling, unable to maintain balance, and his swordsmanship was understandably abysmal.

Someone's desperate efforts might inspire admiration, but Ludwig's plight was nothing but despairing.

He was attempting the impossible.

Even without an arm, one could fight; if one had no legs, they could fight with prosthetics.

But if one's opponents were not humans but monsters, lacking even one component while fighting in the best possible condition would inevitably lead to death.

If Ludwig had been a mage or a supernatural, perhaps things would be different.

However, fighting with just one arm was essentially seeking a place to die.

So, the seniors, juniors, and classmates alike couldn't help but be disheartened by Ludwig's condition.

Currently, the allied forces were reviving the dead as Death Knights, but this didn't mean that Ludwig absolutely had to fight.

That was just an obsession.

The obsession to try and do something, anything more.

It was simply succumbing to evil.

Ludwig didn't scream in pain or throw his sword away.

He didn't kneel and cry out, asking why things weren't going well, nor did he curse the world.

-Bang!

-Thwack!

-Crash!

He lost balance and fell, picked up the weapon that had bounced away, and, despite his attacks lacking proper force, he ceaselessly struck the dummy.

As if there were no shaking, despair, or pain.

He just relentlessly and pathetically beat the dummy.

Never giving up was Ludwig's characteristic, a trait I had assigned him.

But I couldn't help but feel disturbed by Ludwig's refusal to give up, even in situations where he should have.

At this point, he should give up.

He will die in the next battle.

Ludwig thought that the world would grant him what he desired, but it took his arm instead.

Ludwig was no longer the protagonist.

Therefore, there should be no next time, and he should give up now. But he doesn't.

I would rather have Ludwig give up and fade into the background of the story.

I hope he doesn't rush towards an obvious death.

But it seemed that nothing could stop Ludwig.

That obsession bordering on madness, that longing that compelled him to do something - it seemed unstoppable.

There are times when humans must give up.

I realized just how inhuman Ludwig's trait of never giving up was as I saw it with my own eyes.

Ludwig's figure wasn't sublime.

It was despairingly wretched.

As the sun began to set and the disheartened seniors and juniors gradually left, someone approached the sweat-drenched Ludwig, still in the training field on this cold day.

"Ludwig."

“…Yes?"

"Stop it, now. I don't know how many days it's been, but you can't fight anymore."

Cliffman, with a serious, stern expression, stood in front of Ludwig with his sword still sheathed.

"Go back to the Imperial Capital. With your accomplishments so far, that's more than enough."

Ludwig shook his head at Cliffman's words.

"No, I can still do more."

"No. You can't."

It seemed that Cliffman couldn't bear to watch Ludwig's pitiful state any longer and had come to intervene.

"If you don't understand why you can't, I'll show you now."

As if to invite Ludwig to attack, Cliffman assumed a stance, facing Ludwig, who was wrapped in blue mana.

Ludwig quietly nodded as he looked at Cliffman.

“…You're asking for a duel? Then you should use Magic Body Strengthening to…”

"I don't need it."

Cliffman was unarmed.

"It's not necessary to deal with a cripple like you."

"…”

It seemed that Cliffman would rather make Ludwig realize reality and disappear from the battlefield than watch him rush toward an obvious death.

CHAPTER 560

Ludwig did not react with anger or rage at Cliffman's comment about his disability. He was not that kind of person, to begin with.

Instead, he remained devoted to the duel.

-Thunk!

-Bam!

-Crack!

It was painful to watch.

Cliffman truly faced Ludwig without Magic Body Strengthening.

Ludwig was wrapped in a blue aura of magical energy, but he couldn't even touch Cliffman properly.

Having only one arm, his superhuman agility and strength proved to be obstacles for Ludwig.

For starters, he couldn't charge properly. His balance was off, and even running seemed awkward.

Cliffman, without any weapons, used Ludwig's strength against him, knocking him down or tripping him up by sweeping his legs.

He ruthlessly attacked Ludwig's empty right side.

Only targeting his weak points.

Even without Magic Body Strengthening, Cliffman toyed with Ludwig.

Ludwig's left-handed sword could not touch any part of Cliffman.

Rather, the sword itself seemed to be a penalty for Ludwig, as Cliffman used the trajectory of Ludwig's sword against him, either grabbing the blade or kicking it away while suppressing Ludwig.

Using a weapon was turning into a weakness.

"You were already strong… but it seems like you've gotten even stronger."

Ludwig got up, leaning on his left arm and offering an awkward smile. Cliffman neither laughed nor showed anger.

"You know that's not true."

"…"

"It's you who's gotten weaker. Pathetically so."

Ludwig couldn't respond to Cliffman's brutal assessment.

If Ludwig were in his original state, even without Magic Body Strengthening, Cliffman wouldn't have been able to dominate him like this.

"There are people who've trained with only their left or right hand, becoming masters in the use of weapons. It's not impossible. There have been one-armed swordsmen, even among the master class."

Cliffman spoke.

"But you only have two months at most, maybe three. It's impossible for you to reach that level in such a short time. It's just not feasible."

He needed to adapt to his changed body and the altered way of fighting.

Perhaps after twenty years like this, Ludwig could become a master class capable of slaughtering monsters with a single hand.

But time was against him.

Thinking he could become skilled enough to fight like this in just two months was not only arrogant and conceited, but also the delusion of an overly optimistic fool.

"I have to do something. I can't give up like this. Even if I die, if I can save at least one person because of me…”

"Seems to me like Delphin wouldn't have died if it weren't for you, right?"

"…”

At Cliffman's harsh words, Ludwig's eyes widened.

When did the socially inept Cliffman become someone who could say such cruel things?

Too many deaths had changed them all.

Cliffman was no exception.

"If I say Delphin died trying to save you while you were overexerting yourself for Scarlett, is that rude?"

"It's not rude. It's the truth."

Ludwig nodded calmly at Cliffman's harsh words.

No one would have thought about Cliffman's words more than Ludwig himself.

That's why he would have been reproaching himself.

Ludwig didn't get angry at what Cliffman said.

He just quietly nodded.

"That's right. I killed Delphin. It's all my fault. My weakness…”

"If you know it's wrong, you shouldn't make more mistakes."

"Yes. So, I'm trying to find something I can do with this body…”

"That's an even bigger mistake."

Cliffman shakes his head.

"You think if you die while trying to do something, at least you've made an effort and there's no shame in that?"

"Don't you consider how the people left behind would feel?"

"You know how those left behind would feel, yet if you die fighting like this, how do you think they'd feel?"

"Ludwig. It seems like you're planning to beat up dummies until winter is over, but don't."

"Your best course of action is to return to the Imperial Capital."

"Stop acting like you're going to die any moment. Go back to where there's no fighting."

It's not that Ludwig doesn't understand why Cliffman would say such things to him.

Doing nothing is helping.

Dying like this would only cause more pain for others.

"You're very considerate. You're kind, and you can't bring yourself to say harsh words to anyone. I know."

As if knowing Ludwig's nature, Cliffman approaches and places his hand on Ludwig's shoulder, staring into his eyes.

Consideration.

Kindness.

"Right now, you need to be considerate to us."

"…"

"You're casting a huge negative influence on the entire atmosphere of the Royal Class garrison."

An obsession with fighting that borders on madness.

The sight of him gritting his teeth, falling, and getting up again, all while missing an arm.

People don't see the greatness of humanity in that sight.

They only see a one-armed man floundering in despair.

People now despair when they see Ludwig.

"Killing one more monster like this isn't considering us or anyone else. Your return to the Imperial Capital is what considers us. Saving your life, at least, will give us some hope. So we can think you're safe, in a safe place. Go back."

True consideration.

Ludwig probably had no idea that he was becoming a burden to others.

He didn't know how much his self-pity, acting like he's about to die, was hurting people.

Ludwig doesn't know how to give up.

But Ludwig is fundamentally kind and tries to be considerate of others.

You're better off not being here.

That's consideration.

So give up.

"…"

Ludwig couldn't deny Cliffman's words.

Cliffman hurled a torrent of abuse at Ludwig and left.

In the dim training hall, Ludwig was alone.

As Cliffman said, there was a strong shadow of death in Ludwig's actions.

In Ludwig's desperate appearance, one could only feel death. That's why people not only pitied him but also couldn't help but think that he would die soon.

It was harmful to everyone.

If his actions affected only himself, Ludwig would be stubborn.

However, Ludwig learned through Cliffman's words that his stubbornness was harming others as well.

For a while, Ludwig stood silently in the training hall, not saying a word. After hanging his sword on the weapon rack, he left the training hall.

It was impossible to know whether Ludwig would give in and quietly return to the Imperial Capital, or whether he would still try to fight more.

However, it seemed clear that he thought about how his actions, rushing towards an obvious death, would be perceived by others, and how the people left behind would feel if he really did die.

After watching Ludwig's actions, I continued to roam around the Royal Class garrison.

"Ah, you're here."

Adriana spotted me and crouched down to gently stroke my head.

"I'm glad you're safe."

Within Adriana's faint smile, a deep sadness lingered.

The death of Ard de Gritis.

The relationship between Ard and Adriana was an odd one – they were friends, but at the same time, it was difficult for them to return to being just friends. Regardless of whether they were friends or not, the fact that they were comrades who had

fought together on the battlefield remained unchanged.

It was only natural that Adriana grieved for his death.

At first, Ard and I had clashed, but after we exchanged apologies, there was no lingering animosity.

In the end, I thought he was a good guy.

After stroking my head a few times, Adriana headed off somewhere.

Of course, it's not like people cry every day just because someone has died and disappeared.

It is impossible to sob and grieve every moment. One can still laugh, enjoy conversations, and even sing songs.

But even if one doesn't cry every day, shadows of grief accumulate.

I saw those shadows of unerasable sadness gradually adding to everyone's faces, and heavily layered on Adriana's.

I couldn't find Ellen in the garrison, whether she had been absent from the beginning or not. I couldn't see her even when I went into her quarters. Strangely, she was nowhere to be found all day.

Though I was curious about Ellen's situation, I came to the Royal Class garrison to grasp the overall situation and gather information.

So after checking that Ellen's quarters were empty, I continued to wander around.

The most important thing at this point was the evidence that the Empire was reviving corpses.

First, what happened to the corpses in the royal tombs?

And what happened to the swapped corpses in the national cemetery?

And what was happening with the corpses of fallen soldiers?

If such work or experiments were actually taking place, there must be a secret space somewhere in the Allied Forces garrison where it's being done.

Various conjectures had been made, but nothing had been confirmed.

In the case of the Titan developed by Adelia and the Archduke, information had been obtained beforehand. While the detailed technology and methods were unknown, the fact that they were building a massive weapon was not a top-secret matter.

There was no need for it to be a secret since morale would be significantly boosted once the weapon was completed.

Many soldiers who witnessed the might of the Titan felt hope in this war as they watched it pulverize enemies.

However, reviving corpses must be kept top-secret. That's why neither Sarkegaar nor I had any information on it.

That was the frightening truth.

The deceased of the Royal Class – could they, too, be resurrected as Death Knights?

In the cases of Ard and Delphin, their corpses were not found.

In the case of first-year Cardina Ein, there was a corpse.

The details of the funeral proceedings were unknown. However, it may have been secretly taken away and turned into a Death Knight.

What would happen if one knew that a deceased friend had become a Death Knight?

And an even more frightening speculation.

The likelihood of dark magic being involved in raising someone as undead without using Kier's power is high.

B-6, Anna de Gerna.

A person with a talent for dark magic who actually raises dead monsters to fight in battlefields.

I saw that her tent was empty.

The time was night.

She didn't return even though the night was deep.

It's still uncertain whether Anna is involved in that operation or not.

However, it's pointless to question if they would involve a twenty-year-old mage in such an important and secretive task, no matter how talented she is.

The magic research group that created the power cartridge and Moonshine.

Anna, too, is as good as confirmed in her ability, having helped Christina create Moonshine.

And from the beginning, wasn't Adelia, despite being only twenty years old and having the knowledge of the Archduke and the Duchy of Saint Owan, instrumental in creating the Titan?

Second-year students from the Temple are special even within the Royal Class.

Although there was one third-year student included, the inner club consisting of second-year students created two artifacts that would go down in history during their student years.

On top of that, they created the Titan.

It includes the Demon King, of course, and even the Hero.

The second-year students from the Royal Class are now regarded as a very special breed in the long history of the Temple.

So, the possibility of Anna de Gerna, with her talent in dark magic, being involved in the secret project currently being carried out by the Empire… must be considered

high.

I reluctantly gained Kono Lint's cooperation in creating the Death Knight.

There's no law saying the Empire shouldn't make such a proposal to Anna either.

For the same reason, they could also order Anna to revive the corpses of fallen warriors. Besides, the Temple has a dark magic curriculum and dark mages, so Anna isn't the only available dark mage.

I stare at Anna's empty tent.

Where could she have gone?

Will she come back?

I entered Anna's tent, which was open, and looked around, but of course, there were no objects that would yield any useful information.

Gagging

And, I mistakenly smelled the repellent odor in the tent and got stunned for about 30 minutes.

Plague.

Anna's tent was a minefield for me in another sense.

Why isn't my poison resistance talent working against the repellent?

I barely escaped Anna's tent after getting out of the repellent leaves.

Considering that Anna doesn't return even though the night is deep, will she stay somewhere like a laboratory throughout the night?

As I staggered out of Anna's tent, I heard the sound of armor clanking in the distance.

“Good work, Hero.”

“…Yes.”

From afar, Ellen was returning to the Royal Class garisson.

It seemed she had been on a mission somewhere until this night.

Meow

"Ahh…”

Hearing the crying sound from afar, Ellen's pace quickened.

Seeing me in front of Anna's tent, Ellen's expression changed as if she had remembered something she had forgotten.

It must be obvious that she wouldn't have the time to worry or think about anything, being terribly busy, and having tasks to do even now that the vicinity of Serandia had quieted down.

Approaching in her armor, Ellen crouched down to touch me but hesitated.

Ellen looked at her gloves.

Dried, thick bloodstains covered them.

Had she returned from fighting monsters?

Hiss

She carefully removed her gloves, then gently tickled the tip of my nose.

In truth, it wouldn't have mattered if she hadn't removed them, but she seemed worried about affecting me.

As she took off her glove, Ellen's delicate, pale hand was revealed.

She touched my nose a few times with that hand.

"Have you been well…”

She stopped talking and closed her mouth.

Perhaps she thought that asking if I had been well didn't suit the reality of this place.

Ellen seemed to be in so much mental pain that she had to choose even the words to use with an animal.

"You've grown a lot."

Meow

Ellen stroked me a few times and then looked towards her tent.

"It must be cold. Let's go inside."

Purr

White breath escaped from Ellen's mouth. The cold weather was undeniable.

Ellen led the way, and I followed.

There was no point in probing for information about Anna today.

Like everyone else, Ellen's face bore an indelible shadow.

How was the issue with the vengeful spirits progressing?

As Ellen's mental state worsened, it became harder to bear.

However, there wouldn't be any significant battles during this winter, so there would be relatively fewer deaths.

Entering the tent, Ellen removed her armor and headed for the bathroom.

No, she stopped walking and looked back at me.

"Do you want to wash…"

Meow!

“…You still don't like it, huh."

Ellen went to the bathroom alone, as if she wouldn't force me.

According to my double life, I'm a cat, not Reinhardt, so it shouldn't matter if I join her!

That's not the point!

Inside the bright tent, not only Ellen's gloves but also her armor was stained with dried, thick blood from the monster she had fought.

No, it wasn't from fighting a single monster, but rather from facing a horde of them.

Even in the moments when the garrison held its breath, people like Ellen and Saviolin Turner would have no time to rest.

I sat on the makeshift bed and waited for Ellen to finish washing.

But.

I always feel this way during these times…

Let's say everything is resolved in the end.

I don't know if it'll be reconciliation or something else.

Anyway, let's say it's resolved.

When Ellen finds out that this cat was me, wouldn't that be like getting killed on the spot?

Honestly, I wouldn't have anything to say in that case, right?

This is an exceptionally perverted act even among perverts.

I found it amusing as I thought about it.

I'm worrying about getting caught when I don't even know what will happen.

If everything could be resolved, it wouldn't matter if I was caught a million times doing something like this.

Amidst such complicated thoughts, I yawned like a cat, and soon Ellen returned.

Ellen had changed into comfortable clothes and wore slippers.

The only time Ellen could truly relax was when she returned to this tent.

Usually, she would be clad in her elaborate armor, which must be suffocating.

Wouldn't it be uncomfortable?

No, even if it were uncomfortable, the armor wouldn't be the most suffocating part—other aspects would be more stifling.

Ellen sat on the makeshift bed for a moment, then placed me on her lap.

She began to stroke my back, as if scratching it.

It smelled nice.

I'm not sure if it's because I'm a cat, but…

Well…

It's a bit strange, but anyway, it's nice, and, um, it's a very peculiar feeling…

If I were caught, I'd be executed for sure, right?

Even in her everyday clothes, an unidentifiable charm hung around Ellen's neck.

Could that charm be protecting Ellen?

Or is it just that Ellen is strong, that she's special and enduring everything?

I'm not sure.

But Ellen is still here.

Ellen, who has me sitting on her lap, looks down at me.

"I'd forgotten."

-Meow

Could it be that she had completely forgotten about having a cat like me in her quarters, petting and taking care of me?

It's not so much that she forgot, but rather, she had no time to think about it.

She had too much on her mind, and even after this battle ended, Ellen still had many things to do.

So, when she saw me in my cat form just now, Ellen's expression seemed as if she had rediscovered something she had forgotten about for a long time.

Ellen lifts me from her lap and looks into my eyes.

Ellen tilts her head.

"Do I owe you an apology?"

-Mew

"I feel strange."

-Meow

"If I think I'm relieved that you're safe… it doesn't seem right."

In a battle where too many lives were lost, where even Royal Class members suffered casualties, it's too much to rejoice over the survival of a single cat.

How much pressure and responsibility must Ellen be feeling?

"It seems there are people who shouldn't have been born."

Ellen holds me and then hugs me tightly.

"It seems there are people who would have been better off not being born."

Is she even thinking that far?

We end up wishing we never existed, seeing everything as our own responsibility. We wish for a world where we never existed in the first place.

And so, Ellen and I both.

We end up having the same thoughts.

"If I had been small like you… that would have been nice."

Having too much influence on the world, and that influence being a horribly great evil.

But still, having to fix that.

It seemed as if Ellen longed for insignificance.

If she had been an insignificant existence, she could have only had an insignificant influence, and she wouldn't have to deal with all of this because of herself.

"If I had been a nobody… that would have been nice."

Ellen's words,

"That would have… been nice."

Sounded unbearably sad.

CHAPTER 561

Ellen appeared serene in her sleep, as if she had no worries or concerns.

But that peace was short-lived, as she began to suffer, drenched in cold sweat.

She couldn't help but have nightmares.

While I was intentionally made to have nightmares by Airi, Ellen would suffer them unintentionally.

Whether it was due to the vengeful spirits that tried to consume her, or the countless deaths she had witnessed, or the guilt that weighed on her.

"Ugh…"

Though the cold sweat on Ellen's forehead was pitiable, I was not Airi.

All I could do was draw closer to Ellen as she was tormented by her nightmares, and curl up beside her.

Strangely enough, my mere presence seemed to calm her, as she soon embraced me in her sleep and her breathing steadied.

Could this be some form of animal therapy…?

Of course, it was a little…

Close.

Too close, perhaps.

Uh…

Yes, that was it.

The next day.

Ellen woke up with bleary eyes and sat up.

"…"

-Meow

Ellen looked down at me.

By now, I couldn't help but grow accustomed to this eerie yet familiar sight.

Her eyes were empty, as if her consciousness was being eroded by something. She moved more like a machine than a person.

Ellen stared at me for a slow three seconds before turning her gaze away and getting up. It was as if something else was moving Ellen's body, not Ellen herself.

It wasn't that we couldn't communicate.

In fact, I knew she had gone on missions in that state and had always returned safely.

With her eyes still clouded, Ellen entered the bathroom to wash up. Afterward, she donned her armor and activated the armor stand.

-Clank! Clank!

Her armor seamlessly connected, and Ellen was now dressed in the resplendent armor of a warrior.

The Sun's Cape and the Moon's Sword were summoned onto her shoulders and waist.

Without looking back at me, Ellen left the tent.

As these events continued to repeat, Ellen's consciousness would eventually fade, and she would disappear.

There was nothing I could do.

It was impossible for me to forcibly extract the souls lodged within Ellen's body.

Only Lucinil could do that right now. Not just her, but all the other Vampire Lords as well.

And, of course, Lucinil and the other Vampire Lords would not perform the ritual for me, no matter how much I begged. Antirianus would undoubtedly refuse or sabotage the process.

Even if the spirits were extracted, someone would still have to bear the burden of that massive collective.

Whether they entered the body of someone who hated me or someone who loved me, it would be a problem.

The fact remained that Ellen was the only person in the world capable of enduring it.

At some point in the future, I would have to risk everything to do something.

Hoping that I could save Ellen then.

I watched the figure of something that was not quite Ellen leave the barracks without a single word of farewell.

As soon as morning arrived, Ellen left the Royal Class Garrison.

Although she appeared mechanical in her current state, she did not harm or hurt anyone. In fact, most people didn't even realize that something had changed.

From the beginning, Ellen was a woman of few words who silently carried out her duties, so only those who knew her well would notice that something was amiss.

One day, I might have to fight against Ellen, or perhaps against whatever had consumed her body. I didn't know which it would be.

The future I glimpsed in the preview showed me defeated by Ellen, and Ellen committing suicide in front of my lifeless body.

I couldn't tell if the Ellen in that vision was the real Ellen or one possessed by vengeful spirits.

I've been doing mental training to avoid losing when that moment finally comes, but I've only been experiencing defeat.

If the price of winning once in reality is dying countless times in my dreams, I would be content, but there's no way to know until the situation actually arises.

Regardless of who controls Ellen's body now, I must continue to do what needs to be done, just as she is.

I could see that Ellen's condition wasn't critical, but it was slowly deteriorating.

I headed back to Anna's tent, but it was still empty.

I could tell whether she hadn't returned or had come back late and left early in the morning.

The inside of the tent looked exactly the same as when I had seen it yesterday.

Anna hadn't returned.

Given the nature of magic research and experiments, it was common for her to work through the night, and some researchers even slept in their laboratories.

And just like yesterday, the royal class students who saw me didn't discuss where Anna went or express curiosity about her whereabouts.

It was strange that Ellen talked to me about various things, but most people simply petted me without saying much or spoke amongst themselves.

There's an inherent limit to gathering information while in the form of a beast.

Namely, I can't ask questions.

I can only gather information from the conversations that pass between people.

Thus, if I were in human form, I could simply ask where Anna went and the problem would be solved. But as a cat, I can't know what she's doing or where she's gone

unless she comes up in people's conversations.

And here's the problem.

"When did this guy come back?"

"This one has grown a lot too."

-Meow

People approach and talk about the cat, but they never discuss what I'm curious about.

It's exhausting to eavesdrop and wait for Anna to come up in conversation while lurking nearby.

Should I just call Kono Lint?

He might know where Anna is.

But I don't want to reveal that the cat at the royal class base is actually Reinhardt.

Well, it's not like it matters anymore if Kono Lint finds out. If anything, it's like I've already revealed something I shouldn't have. But I'd rather not be known as a strange pervert here.

I could simply continue using my beauty disguise to meet him outside the royal class base.

He would understand right away if I say, "You know, there's only one other woman like me who could mess with your life, besides Sarkegaar."

But Kono Lint is a non-combatant, and his skills are in high demand at all times.

He can move anywhere in an instant, making him the hardest one to find if I'm determined to do so.

Calling him again after telling him not to investigate would make me look inconsistent.

Wait, he's not actually trying to look into this on his own, is he? I don't want to create trouble unintentionally.

It was certain that Anna hadn't returned to the garrison.

However, that didn't necessarily mean she was involved in this matter.

Sarkegaar was collecting information in his own way, so even if my side came up empty, there might still be something from his end.

As for me, my limits were clear, and I had only been at the Royal Class garrison.

Sarkegaar, who had been investigating the entire Allied garrison, might have obtained some other information.

At the designated time and the predetermined rendezvous point.

Having returned to my human form, I met with Sarkegaar, and we faced each other in a dimly lit corner of the supply warehouse area of the Allied garrison.

"Gathering information is difficult."

“…As expected, huh."

Obtaining information about the Titan wasn't easy either. But in this case, it was the kind of research or experiment that absolutely couldn't be made public.

So, it must have been equipped with a level of security far beyond that of the Titan case.

"Basically, mages have a habit-like tendency to not want to reveal their research to outsiders. That's why security is more thorough than in other places."

"A habit?"

"Yes, it's similar to how dogs bury bones in the ground."

Sarkegaar's words were somehow amusing in this situation.

Mages had a pathological dislike for revealing their own research achievements to others. As a result, they tended to obsess over security.

This habit-like behavior persisted even when the research in question wasn't necessarily a secret.

"Also, mages tend to encrypt their documents. This is true for joint research, and even more so for individual research."

“…They sure live a tiring life."

"Indeed, I've confirmed that there are a large number of confidential documents in each garrison where mages gather, but very few documents could be understood."

"So, it's possible that these confidential documents have nothing to do with this case?"

"Yes, Your Highness."

The mages' security obsession and encryption were now obstacles.

The Titan case involved a massive project that was extremely difficult to conceal. From the start, each part of the Titan was enormous, so transportation alone required a tremendous amount of manpower.

"What about finding the place where the research or experiment is being conducted?"

"As I mentioned, most of the mage group garrisons have much stricter access control than the Royal Class garrisons."

There were too many potential locations, most of which were difficult to enter, making it impossible to know where to go. The Allied Forces were a mobile army. Nevertheless, within this garrison, the fact that there were areas with strict access control demonstrated the strength of the mages' security obsession.

And, of course, it would be difficult for Sarkegaar to infiltrate the Royal Mage Corps' garrison area. Even if he were to succeed, obtaining decisive evidence would be even more challenging.

In the end, Sarkegaar hadn't managed to find out anything concrete yet.

"Hmm… This situation isn't that different from the Titan case…"

"If such a thing is really happening, it's true that a massive area would be needed to conceal it."

An experiment involving thousands of corpses. Although the end product might not be as large as the Titan, the scale of the experiment itself would have to be as massive as the Titan project.

A highly secured experiment.

However, there were far too many watchful eyes in this environment.

Where on earth could the experiment be taking place within the Allied garrison?

It was impossible to know.

If Anna were involved in this experiment, following her trail would reveal the location of the research facility. However, it was uncertain whether she was staying at the research site or not returning to the Royal Class garrison at all.

"For now, we have no choice but to keep looking. Continue your investigation, but don't take any excessive risks. I'll do what I can on my end as well."

"Yes, Your Highness."

Sarkegaar quietly nodded, transformed into a black cat, and disappeared somewhere.

Something.

Could it really be such a complicated issue?

Or was it possible that they were overlooking something very simple?

It was a strange feeling.

CHAPTER 562

Mages are, by nature, intelligent people.

No, to be more precise, it is geniuses who become Mages.

Yet, it was amusing how they all shared similar habits.

They showed an obsessive compulsion for encryption and security, fearing that their research might be stolen. It's probably because such incidents were quite common.

Naturally, the places where Mages conducted their experiments and research were heavily secured, and there were so many of them that it would take a considerable amount of time to break into each one.

Debating whether I should call upon Kono Lint, I eventually returned to the Royal Class garrison.

In the end, wandering around trying to pick up on something was the best I could do.

As a result, just like the previous day, I couldn't help but encounter various people from the Royal Class.

"Huh? You're back. Where have you been all this time?"

Adelia, carrying a bundle of something in her arms, looked like she wanted to pat me but couldn't because her hands were full. Instead, she shuffled her feet.

Despite being the core developer of Titan, which would undoubtedly play a significant role in this war, she still appeared clumsy.

Throughout the winter, Adelia would likely be occupied with the maintenance and improvement of Titan without a moment's rest.

Ironically, people like Adelia seemed busier during these days of rest.

Adelia had the talent for summoning magic, but she was, in fact, considered non-

combat personnel. Applying magic crafting proved to be more helpful in battle, given the current reality.

Eventually, with both hands full, Adelia glanced at me with an apologetic look and left the Royal Class garrison.

There was no point in following Adelia, as her work throughout the winter would be related to Titan.

As I walked around the tents, I tried to focus on any sounds coming from within.

"Ludwig, even in the capital, there's work you can do."

From one tent, I heard the voice of Teacher Mustlang, whom I hadn't heard in a long time.

Could it be a consultation?

I sat near the tent and focused on the voices.

"You have experience fighting monsters, so you could work as an instructor at a recruit training center, or even teach Magic Body Strengthening to Moonshine users. Both of these would be meaningful, no, very important tasks. You know that, right?"

"Yes…"

Yesterday, Cliffmann harshly told Ludwig to go to the rear lines. He didn't want him acting like a dead man and ruining the atmosphere.

But that was because Cliffmann didn't want Ludwig to die. He knew Ludwig was a stubborn person, and if he genuinely cared for others, he would disappear from their sight.

However, Teacher Mustlang was different.

"Participating in battle and killing monsters isn't the only meaningful work in a war. Quartermasters, instructors, recruitment officers—all of their efforts and support make it possible for the allied forces to move as they do. Who would think their work is not important?"

"Yes, it's important. Of course… I don't ignore or think that they're unnecessary…"

Teacher Mustlang seemed to be trying to comfort Ludwig and convince him that there was plenty of work to be done in the rear, and that those tasks were not any lighter than what was happening on the battlefield.

Ludwig was not without options for contributing.

"Yes, it's important. Of course… I don't mean to ignore those people or think they're not needed…"

It seemed like he was trying to persuade Ludwig with kind words, that there were many things he could do from the rear, and that their tasks were by no means lighter than those on the battlefield.

Ludwig was not without capabilities.

As Teacher Mustlang had said, Ludwig had plenty of experience fighting monsters. Not only in this war, but ever since the Gate Incident, Ludwig had survived nearly three years of battling monsters.

In the end, he couldn't be called anything but a veteran.

Monsters were unpredictable, but Ludwig had seen that unpredictability time and time again, so he could teach it to the rookies and those unfamiliar with fighting monsters.

He could be an instructor, teach Magic Body Strengthening, and even join the Imperial Guard.

In the vast refugee residential area, just one small monster appearing could result in a massacre.

Ludwig, having lost an arm, might have a limited role in the coalition forces facing hundreds, thousands, or even millions of powerful monsters, but in the rear, he could crush such insignificant monsters with his bare hands.

"Return to the Imperial Capital, there are many things you can do there."

Though he couldn't see Teacher Mustlang and Ludwig's expressions, despair could

be felt in Ludwig's silence.

The sorrow and guilt of not being able to fight anymore and causing the morale of the people to drop because of his presence.

It was impossible not to think it was cruel.

In the end, Ludwig lost his arm and Delphin died.

But it was a fact that they saved Scarlett.

Everyone knew that but wanted Ludwig to live, so they tried to force him back.

I didn't know what was right.

Whether it was right to let him continue fighting, even if he had to risk death.

Or if it was right to forcibly send him back to the rear, treating him like a burden.

"Ludwig, there's no need to rush your decision. The coalition forces will be staying in Serandia for a while. Going back to the Imperial Capital to cool your head and think slowly might be a good idea."

Telling him not to decide right away but to take his time and think.

“…I'll think about it."

Ludwig wanted to stay on the battlefield, but no one else wished for that.

Cliffman's harsh words and Teacher Mustlang's persuasion.

I watched from a distance as Ludwig left Teacher Mustlang's tent with a subdued expression.

What would become of Ludwig now?

It might be better for him to completely withdraw from this fight.

Being reckless, he might die in the very next battle if left as is. I agree with Teacher Mustlang's words that staying in the rear, whether as a trainee, a rookie, or anything else, would undoubtedly be a meaningful task.

Is the original protagonist going to leave like this?

I continued to explore the Royal Class garrison with Ludwig's lonely figure behind me.

Ellen was gone, and Anna hadn't returned either.

I was planning to call Kono Lint soon, but he was also absent from the garrison.

So.

As I wandered around here and there, picking up stories.

"Pat, pat."

Somehow, after some time had passed, he found himself sitting on Adriana's lap, entrusting his body to the caressing fingers that tickled his chin.

"Do you want some?"

-Meow.

As he accepted and ate the thinly torn jerky that Adriana offered…

Am I just a beast now…

Somehow, this side of me is slowly starting to feel more comfortable…

No, it doesn't make sense how I'm so cute just by being alive.

Honestly, did I save someone or establish some kind of specialty in this form? I receive praise just for not dying, for following the allied forces, and for merely hanging around.

How comfortable must the lives of beasts be? Of course, under the premise of being cute.

As if everyone in this position did the same, Adriana had me sitting on her lap, caressing me, but she also seemed to have many concerns.

Her expression was far from bright.

Adriana sat on a wooden box installed near the training grounds of the Royal Class garrison.

Next to the wooden box were the large hammer and shield that Adriana had been wielding so far, leaning against each other.

Adriana, who used to use a sword, was now using a shield and hammer on this battlefield.

Superhumans have abnormal strength compared to ordinary people, so the weight of the weapons themselves isn't a big problem.

There are quite a few people who changed their main weapons to hammers, axes, two-handed swords, or other heavy weapons, including greatswords, as they began to fight monsters, and Adriana was one of them.

The hammer Adriana uses is a weapon that an ordinary person can barely lift with both hands, and even then, only if they are strong.

Adriana fights with it in one hand.

She blocks with the shield, and crushes with the hammer.

Ludwig could probably handle such a large weapon with one hand as well.

The important thing is not whether Ludwig is used to that fighting style, but his gloomy attitude, which makes it seem like he might die in the process.

Everyone tries to dissuade the guy who is bound to become a moth to the flame.

Anyway, Adriana had been practicing her combat skills in the training grounds when she found me and decided to take a break.

"It's quiet…”

Adriana muttered to herself, looking at the peaceful training grounds.

There were people in the training grounds, but it wasn't bustling. After all, the Royal Class didn't have many members to begin with.

"Adriana…"

"Ah, Redina."

When Adriana turned her head to the voice coming from the side, there stood Redina.

Redina sat down next to Adriana with a gloomy expression, and silently hugged Adriana's waist.

As if accustomed to it, Adriana opened her arms and embraced Redina's shoulders.

Redina snuggled into Adriana's arms.

"…"

"…"

Ard de Gritis had died.

The death of a classmate was as shocking to the third-year students as it was to the second-year students.

Without saying a word, the two hugged each other quietly.

They knew that merely bringing up the topic would be hard for both of them.

Redina cried silently in Adriana's embrace, and Adriana, with her eyes brimming with tears, comforted Redina's shoulders.

Tears would easily flow at any time.

It would only get worse from here.

"I don't know what to do…"

"Are you talking about the Cayer incident…?"

“…Yes."

Cayer.

And Redina.

Yesterday, I saw the two of them having something like an argument.

But the situation seemed to have changed slightly from what had been observed.

Adriana seemed to know what was going on.

"If I had known that…”

“…Did you apologize?"

"I did… but I don't know. It seems like he won't even listen to me… He says it's not for my sake that he's doing this… just saying that…”

"Is his life really in danger?"

Listening to their conversation, it was inevitable to understand the situation.

As he charged the Arc Crystal, Cayer occasionally tried to charge mana beyond his limits. This was shortening his lifespan.

It wasn't a problem during normal times, but in battle, urgent situations were frequent. Even knowing he was out of strength, there were times when Cayer charged his mana until he was exhausted.

Moreover, there were many cases where even Redina urged him to charge until he collapsed.

However, Redina did not know that it was shortening Cayer's life, and Cayer did not tell her. If she found out, she would worry needlessly.

His attitude was that he would willingly sacrifice a little of his lifespan if it meant being able to help where magic was needed at the moment.

Redina no longer had any intention of urging or nagging Cayer.

But Cayer wasn't exhausting himself for Redina's sake in the first place. So there was no point in what she had to say.

If Cayer dies, the Arc Crystal will become useless.

Then Redina won't be able to cast magic as freely as she does now.

Of course, it's not like she's crying and leaning on Adriana because she's afraid of becoming useless.

"I don't know what to do…"

Can the two of them apologize and reconcile?

Even if they reconcile, would anything change?

Since Cayer isn't overdoing it for Redina, her apologies and dissuasion mean nothing to him. So even if they reconcile, Cayer will push himself when necessary.

He's not going to die right away, so it's okay.

Even if he pushes himself for a while, Cayer won't die immediately, and that's true.

But no one knows when that "right away" will be.

War takes lives.

And it keeps devouring those who survive.

Redina, disheartened, went back after talking with Adriana, who focused on training alone after putting me down from her lap.

I left the training ground and wandered around the Royal Class garrison again.

Perhaps because of winter, or the atmosphere, the garrison was quiet and desolate. The weather wasn't that warm, so it was better to rest in a warm barracks, and there

was no need to go outside unless there was a mission.

Anna hadn't returned, and Ellen wasn't there either.

Rather than waiting endlessly for Anna, who I didn't know when she would return, I thought it would be better to wait for Kono Lint.

Somehow, I wanted to use the Kono Lint chance again. He was most likely to appear in the place where he was most likely to come if he returned to the garrison.

The dining tent.

At lunchtime, people couldn't help but flock here to eat.

Both Adriana, who was training, and Ludwig joined the students gathered at the dining tent at lunchtime.

And I, too, waited for Kono Lint to appear among the students, as this dining tent was pretty much my usual spot.

However, something was a bit strange.

The bowl of milk placed before me was just as it was.

Let's say it's fine that Anna and Ellen are not here.

Kono Lint didn't even appear in the dining tent. Let's assume that he had some other task and couldn't come.

I was watching the B-class members gathered around a long table, eating their meal.

B-3, Scarlett

B-10, Ranian Sesor

B-11, Ludwig

There were only three second-year B-class members in the dining hall.

Only three showed up at lunchtime.

There were two casualties in the B-class.

B-4, Asher; B-9, Delphin Izzard.

Dettomorian was known to be in the Imperial Capital.

Charlotte couldn't possibly be here.

The telepath, B-9 Evia, practically lives in the garrison.

It was then that I realized what I was missing.

Since I had only been searching for Anna, I hadn't thought of who else might be missing.

Excluding those who couldn't be here, there were two more people whom I hadn't encountered at all in the past couple of days.

B-5, Christina

B-2, Louis Ancton

Like Anna, I had no memory of ever meeting them even once.

I had been so focused on Anna de Gerna that I hadn't noticed the others.

Let's say that Anna is one thing.

But what about the other two? Why aren't they here?

“Ludwig, what will you do?”

As I listened to Ranian Sesor's cautious question.

I finally realized what I had been overlooking.

If Ludwig were to return to the rear, he would go back to the Imperial Capital, so it's obvious where he would be.

Shouldn't he return to the temple?

The temple.

I need some time to think.

With permission, some students would be able to return to and stay at the temple.

I completely forgot about the soldiers on leave who were directly seen in the Imperial Capital.

I hadn't thought of such a simple thing.

There's no reason for the royal family to conduct secret research in a base with many prying eyes like the allied forces.

The temple is practically empty now.

But it was once the cradle of academia and research, even housing a university.

The facilities would be more than enough.

Rather, it would be incredibly risky to conduct research at the allied forces base, so there's no reason to do it here.

It was a problem that I assumed they would naturally do experiments related to the undead here since they had developed the Titan on-site due to unavoidable circumstances.

If they wanted to conduct secret and discreet research, they could simply do it at the temple instead of here.

If Anna were a research associate, she wouldn't be somewhere in this base but at the temple.

However.

When I thought about the missing people and my speculation, my mind couldn't help but wander in a different direction.

What if they hadn't returned to the temple simply for a winter break but for research purposes?

Let's say that's the case for Anna.

But why Louis Ancton and Christina?

No, in the first place…

Louis Ancton wasn't a researcher on a large project like the Titan. Despite having sufficient skills and knowledge to assist in that research, Louis Ancton wasn't included in Adelia's and the Archduke's project.

So what had he been doing all this time?

CHAPTER 563

Louis Ancton's talent was academic.

He couldn't use magic, and thus couldn't contribute to battles.

However, he had been with the allied forces, and had been seen several times at the royal class garrison.

Louis Ancton was like a mage who couldn't use magic, a mage scholar. In fact, he had helped in the design of power cartridges and Moonshines.

In the original work, Louis had helped improve the magic level of his classmates, and he was likely doing the same here.

Apologies to Louis, but when compared, he was like a lower-tier version of Harriet.

However, that was only because the comparison was with our stubborn protagonist. It didn't mean Louis was incompetent.

Although he couldn't use magic, he had the talent to perfectly understand and design all magic-related aspects.

Thinking from that point, there was a problem.

Louis Ancton had no connection to the Titan research project that Adelia had been working on. However, if he had been involved, he would have undoubtedly been of great help.

Louis Ancton was unrelated to the Titan project.

He might have improved and modified the battle magic of other wizards, but he was more than capable of taking on a major project.

The fact that Louis was unrelated to the development of Titan meant he had been entrusted with a completely different project.

Louis Ancton, quite literally, had talent in understanding dark magic.

So if Anna was working on a project related to the undead, Louis Ancton could help or even lead it.

As a result, although not yet confirmed, some facts had been revealed.

Anna was not eating and sleeping in a research facility somewhere in this garrison.

From the beginning, there was no reason for the allied forces' garrison to conduct research related to dark magic.

There would be many more facilities at the temple, and security would be easier to maintain.

Coming to the allied forces' garrison was like barking up the wrong tree.

To learn the truth behind the Empire's activities, one must go to the temple instead.

If Anna was really involved, whether Louis Ancton was involved as well.

If even Christina was involved, what were they doing?

What I thought was related to Death Knights could be very different, and it was impossible to predict what it was.

Would I have to see it with my own eyes?

If so, how?

Only when Louis Ancton and Christina were confirmed to be absent did I realize that my focus had been too narrow.

I had thought the desolate atmosphere at the royal class garrison was due to the aftermath of the Serandia battle.

It was winter, and the weather was cold, so I believed many people were staying inside the barracks.

However, it turned out that the desolate atmosphere was due to the lack of people.

During the winter, the garrison was not expected to move, and with the core monster areas in Serandia being suppressed, the threat of monsters had decreased.

Royal class personnel received special treatment. It seemed that they were accommodating those who wanted to spend the winter at the temple.

I had seen soldiers on vacation from the Imperial Court and hadn't considered that there would be similar personnel in the royal class.

Knowing one thing led me to know only one thing, instead of ten.

It was impossible to know if experiments were really being conducted at the temple.

However, since it was almost certain that Anna had returned to the temple, the likelihood of the experiment taking place there, rather than at the Allied Forces' base, had increased significantly.

The temple had superior facilities and security, so there was no need to conduct a dangerous experiment at the heavily monitored Allied Forces' base.

It was an ironic situation.

Usually, students would leave school during holidays or breaks.

In this case, however, the students were granted a break and returned to school instead.

I finally took a good look at the desolate Royal Class base.

What could be happening there?

How could I confirm this?

Bertus was in the Imperial Palace.

Tetra, the emperor's office at the Imperial Palace.

Bertus began reading the report.

For a while, Bertus remained silent.

Saviolin Turner also did not speak.

After a long silence, the emperor spoke briefly.

"Commander Turner, if divine punishment is given to those who have sinned, what kind of punishment should I receive?"

It was a horrible affair.

It was something beyond words.

If the guilt of those who ordered the act is greater than that of the ones who committed it, Bertus would be the greatest sinner in the world.

The divine punishment given to such a person shouldn't merely take their life.

Bertus wondered what could be worse than death.

"Your Majesty, all of this is for the future and well-being of humanity. You have made a decision for humanity. It cannot be called a sin."

"Do you truly believe that?"

It was an overly exemplary answer.

"…"

Just because it was necessary doesn't mean it wasn't a sin.

Both Turner and Bertus knew that it was merely a comforting statement.

That's why Turner couldn't respond to Bertus's overly direct question.

One cannot cover the sky with the palm of one's hand.

"Well, divine punishment might not even exist in the first place."

If God watched over the world, why does sin exist, and why did the Gate Incident happen?

"Come to think of it, divine punishment seems ridiculous whether it exists or not."

"Ridiculous, you say…?"

"If insurmountable trials are given without sin and judgments are made, isn't that some unfunny prank?"

"…"

"If there is no reward or punishment, why did these events have to happen in the first place? What was the purpose of the gods throwing such a thing into the world?"

"…"

"Well, I now believe that the so-called gods no longer have any interest in this world."

Bertus clicked his tongue briefly.

"I apologize, Commander Turner. It seems I am agitated. Pointless talk…"

Bertus wiped his face several times.

Divine punishment.

There is no such thing in this world.

Then why does sin exist?

Who should be held responsible for sin?

Who should bear the burden, and who should be punished?

"By the way, have you grasped the situation with the Holy Knights?"

"……We have not identified which specific group is involved. Also, we have the problem of not being able to investigate the scene."

Not long ago, Bertus received a report that the tomb of the saints, located in the basement of the Holy Knights' headquarters, had been destroyed.

The tomb was destroyed, and the remains were stolen.

"Eleion Bolton is expected to return to the Imperial Capital soon."

“……I see."

The matter of the Holy Knights was the Holy Knights' business.

Hoping that this matter would not spark a fire in the wrong place, Bertus glanced at his now cold tea.

"One of our classmates has died, and another has been left crippled."

"Yes…”

The deceased classmate.

And the crippled classmate.

"I know that Ludwig is a stubborn fellow."

"Yes, that's true."

During the time when Saviolin Turner took on the role of a dormitory supervisor for Charlotte's protection, she had once observed Ludwig's swordsmanship.

Initially, it was just an excuse to observe Reinhardt's swordsmanship, but she had long watched Ludwig, who kept asking for guidance persistently despite stumbling repeatedly.

She had also observed Delphin, though not in as much detail.

Delphin was dead, and Ludwig had lost an arm.

Naturally, Bertus was aware of his classmates' situations to some extent, even if not in great detail.

And not only during their time at the temple, but Bertus had also been informed of their individual achievements since the outbreak of the Gate incident.

Ludwig.

One of the four classmates who had gained Magic Body Strengthening without learning it.

His comparatives were the hero and demon king, but compared to his peers of the same age, Ludwig was an unparalleled talent.

He was a monster.

If it hadn't been for the war, he would have had more than enough potential to join the Master Class within a few years.

"I know that he's not the type to give up easily."

"Perhaps, that's true."

And it wasn't just his abilities but also his personality.

His closest friend, Delphin, had died, and he had always chosen the most dangerous battlefields during the Gate incident. Therefore, it was unlikely that he would give up fighting just because he had lost an arm.

He had the kind of stubbornness that could get him killed.

Bertus could foresee what would happen without seeing it firsthand.

To prevent the miserable deaths of his classmates.

Before the moth was consumed by the flame.

"Tell him to return to the temple."

Bertus issued the imperial decree.

There are beings in the world who don't need to persuade or convince others.

Beings who simply need to say "come" or "go" to make it so.

Bertus was one of them.

Even in the current state of the world, at least on human lands, he still held that power.

As Ludwig stood at a crossroads between fighting on in rage and despair or not, facing Cliffman's harsh words, his friends' persuasion, and his teacher's advice, he soon faced a single coercion.

"Ludwig, His Majesty has decreed that you return to the temple."

The emperor's order was relayed through Master Mustlang.

"Go to the warp spot and deliver this document, and you should be able to return to the Imperial Capital."

"…"

Master Mustlang carefully explained where the warp spot was located within the allied forces' base and who Ludwig should look for.

It was a humbling experience.

An imperial decree was not something given lightly.

Even though he was a fellow classmate who had been injured and was stubbornly intent on fighting, the direct decree to return to the temple quietly showed how kind the emperor was.

He had gone so far as to issue a direct decree to a student who was, albeit of Royal Class, left crippled and didn't necessarily need his attention.

Gratitude was due.

There was no need for persuasion from others, facing reality, or for Ludwig to accept their words and return quietly with understanding.

Just go back.

With a single command, Bertus could force Ludwig's actions, and Ludwig had no other choice.

Master Mustlang's face was also deeply moved when he saw that Emperor Bertus, having become emperor, was personally paying attention to Ludwig.

However, upon seeing Ludwig's stern expression, Master Mustlang's face gradually hardened as well.

"Ludwig, this is an imperial edict. It's not something you can refuse. You know that, right?"

His attitude seemed hesitant.

This was the emperor's consideration.

The moment he refused, he couldn't complain even if his neck was severed.

An overbearing consideration.

"Yes, Teacher. I know. Of course…"

Ludwig nodded quietly.

Master Mustlang heaved a sigh of relief, as he didn't know if Ludwig would make a big fuss about it.

Ludwig stared at the document containing the emperor's decree, holding it in his hand.

No matter how much Ludwig didn't want to leave the battlefield, he knew he couldn't refuse the emperor's command.

Now there's really no choice.

What must be accepted has to be accepted.

There is no place for him on this battlefield, and countless people are trying to send

him away from the battlefield out of consideration for him.

He can no longer refuse.

"When I return to the Imperial Capital, there will be something I can do, right?"

"Of course, I told you, didn't I? There will be many places that need you. You also have friends in the dormitory now, so you won't be lonely."

Master Mustlang smiled brightly and nodded, thinking Ludwig might be stubborn about it.

Despite his many stubbornness, obsessions, and desires to fight,

Even the short-lived determination and resolution to kill the Demon King with his own hands were eventually broken by others' intentions.

With the emperor's command as the last straw, Ludwig must leave the battlefield.

There was no need for an overly long farewell.

The very next day,

Ludwig exchanged simple greetings with his fellow Royal Class students, gathered his belongings, and headed toward the warp point.

Ranian Sesor and Scarlett followed Ludwig to see him off until the very end.

"You have Christina, Louis, Anna, and Dettomorian, right? So you won't be bored."

"That's true."

"Take care, Ludwig."

"Thank you."

Ludwig lost his arm while saving Scarlett. Ultimately, Ludwig had to leave because of her, so her expression was filled with guilt.

"Don't apologize, Scarlett."

"Ludwig…"

Hearing such words only made Scarlett feel more miserable.

He decided to leave the battlefield.

So there should be no regrets.

As Teacehr Mustlang said, Ludwig believes there will be something for him to do in the imperial capital.

Whatever it is, their tasks are not trivial, so he believes he can still do something even if he cannot fight in this war.

The emperor's command is something to be grateful for, not a reason to feel bitter and resentful.

If he ever meets the emperor, he should kneel and thank him.

Among the people and supplies returning to the imperial capital at the warp spot, the mages in charge of the warp began casting Mass Teleport.

From beyond the boundary of the warp spot, Ludwig waved to his friends remaining on the battlefield.

"Stay safe. Please."

Death is a sad thing.

Praying for the wellbeing of his friends from the distant imperial capital upon hearing news from the battlefield is now the only thing left for him to do.

It may be sorrowful,

But knowing there's no place for him anymore, Ludwig leaves.

"Yes, you too, Ludwig."

I will fight on your behalf and survive until the end.

Scarlett had said this to Ludwig several times, and Ranian Sesor continued to wave at Ludwig until the long Mass Teleport casting was complete.

The casting of Mass Teleport takes time.

It wasn't a spell that just anyone could use, and it was akin to transporting personnel and supplies simultaneously, operating at certain intervals. Moreover, Warp Spots were being used at various locations of the allied forces' base.

Thus, until the Mass Teleport at the Warp Spot was activated, Ludwig could watch as people and supplies were gradually sent back to the Empire.

Ludwig had not returned to the Empire since his deployment and had never been to a Warp Spot like this.

However, even Ludwig, who had no reason to come to the Warp Spot, couldn't help but notice that something about the situation was quite unusual.

'...Holy Knights?'

At the Warp Spot, there were not only soldiers returning to the Empire for the winter but also Holy Knights.

That much was understandable.

But there were significantly more Holy Knights than others.

'Is the commander going back as well?'

The Holy Knights Commander, Eleion Bolton, was among them.

By now, Ludwig had no choice but to recognize the faces of the leaders of the prominent groups.

Seeing the serious expressions on all their faces, Ludwig couldn't help but feel a strange sense of unease.

Had something happened?

That wasn't all.

“Ellen…?”

“Are you going back too?”

“Yeah, I'm going back for a bit and then returning.”

From a distance, Ellen was approaching, and Ranian Sesor and Scarlett turned their heads upon spotting her.

Naturally, the others' gazes shifted toward Ellen.

The Hero, Ellen Artorius, approached the Warp Spot wearing not her usual battle armor but plain clothes.

Being an exceptional existence, Ellen would have been able to use the Warp Spot freely with the headquarters' permission.

But this Ellen seemed different from the one they usually saw.

She was holding something in her right hand.

'Meow!'

'Chirp!'

'Meow, meow, meow!'

In the unexpected cage held in Ellen's right hand, a bewildered-looking black cat was spinning in circles and meowing.

“I'm going to leave it in the Capital, where it'll be safer.”

“That makes sense.”

“Indeed, it does.”

“Meow!”

Ellen hugged the cage as if it were precious, and the cat, looking extremely confused, spun around inside the narrow cage with wide-open eyes.

CHAPTER 564

I had let my guard down.

Having returned to the garrison, Ellen had placed me on her lap and stroked me for a while, lulling me into an unwitting slumber.

Honestly, it was impossible to resist sleep with Ellen's gentle touch, which I had grown accustomed to.

When I came to my senses, I found myself trapped in a cage.

It was a conspiracy.

A scheme.

There was a hidden agenda.

I had been deceived by Ellen.

I couldn't tell who she had spoken to or what was discussed, but it seemed Ellen had decided it was better for me to be raised at the temple, rather than in this dangerous battlefield.

If I were a real cat, it would be nothing short of a miracle that I had managed to survive and follow the allied forces thus far.

To be blunt, it wasn't the monsters that were the problem – I could be crushed to death while hiding in their luggage, and there would be nothing to say.

I could see what Ellen was thinking without her saying it.

She couldn't stay at the temple forever.

Even if she couldn't see me, she wanted to send me somewhere safe.

Just as she wanted to send Ludwig back to the temple because it was dangerous, she

wanted to raise me in the temple because it was dangerous for me as well.

-Meow!

No matter how much I cried and scratched from within the cage, Ellen appeared to grit her teeth and endure it.

She must be sad about parting, but she must have decided it would be better for someone else to raise me in a safe environment.

I could break the cage if I wanted to, but that would lead to a situation beyond control.

Not only Ellen, but even Scarlett, and Ranian Sesor seemed to agree with Ellen's words, nodding their heads as if it was the natural course of action. Ludwig, whose return to the empire was decided, had a wry smile but didn't say it was pointless.

Well… Ludwig wasn't in a position to worry about a single cat right now.

-Teleport recipients, please step back!

The mass teleport casting was nearing completion.

-Meow!

-Scratch!

"It's frustrating, I know. I'm sorry. I'll let you out in a bit."

Ellen whispered quietly, thinking I was upset because I was trapped.

-Flash!

The brilliant light of the mass teleport enveloped us.

Ellen was particularly busy, but it was safe to say that there was little danger at the garrison. That's why Ellen could afford this much time.

Rather, Ellen absolutely needed some rest.

It was during this precious and rare respite, the length of which was uncertain, that she decided to entrust the cat to the temple.

This was a problem.

Quite a big problem, at that.

If I were to be left at the temple in the future, I would no longer be able to use the cat operation.

Although I could disguise myself as another cat, wouldn't it be suspicious for one cat to disappear and another to appear immediately after?

Although a temple stray cat would undoubtedly have a better fate than a garrison stray cat, I am not a cat!

Upon returning to the Imperial Capital, Ellen wore a hood to avoid being recognized.

She seemed to be heading for the royal class dormitory, and there was someone with her who had no particular reason to accompany her.

Ludwig, who had lost an arm and received a rear-guard standby order.

Ellen, returning to leave the cat.

Looking at it this way, Ellen seemed like a reckless person, but there was no one to scold her for acting this way, given what she had accomplished so far.

Ludwig and Ellen were not close friends.

However, it wasn't as if they were on bad terms either.

"Are you on a break?"

"No, I'll be heading back soon."

Ellen replied softly to Ludwig's question.

Her voice carried a sense of guilt.

It seemed like she thought Ludwig losing his arm was her responsibility.

As she believed everything that happened after the Gate incident was her fault, she couldn't help but think Ludwig's situation was her responsibility as well.

And even though it was necessary, the fact that Ludwig, who had lost an arm, was paying attention to a cat seemed like a strange behavior to her.

Ludwig, of course, wouldn't blame Ellen for this.

"From now on… you'll be staying at the temple?"

"Yeah. But I won't just sit still. I believe there's something I can do at the temple. Even though it turned out like this… there must be something."

Ludwig spoke with a hint of cheerfulness.

"There must be. Definitely."

Ellen responded softly. Ludwig's strength was his bright nature.

Although the darkness within him had grown due to war and countless misfortunes, Ludwig didn't want his gloom to spread to others.

"For now, I'm thinking about things like training new recruits or joining the guard. I can handle small monsters. The refugee areas are said to be quite dangerous, right?"

"That's true."

Since Ludwig had no choice but to return to the temple, it seemed like he was trying to find work that needed him there.

"Don't push yourself too hard."

Ellen added quietly.

In the end, it seemed obvious that once Ludwig became somewhat accustomed to using weapons with his left hand, he would devote himself to combat-related tasks.

The dangers he would face at the temple would be less than those on the battlefield. However, there was no guarantee he wouldn't be seriously injured again while trying to kill a monster.

“…I'll be careful."

Ludwig's right sleeve fluttered emptily.

I had already come to the temple.

So, a black cat similar to me could no longer appear at the military base.

Was the cat operation permanently sealed?

Should I try something similar with a dog next time? It feels like I might end up on a leash, though.

No, there's no guarantee that Ellen would find another animal as cute as she found me now, is there?

It's not about being cute, it's about whether or not I can attract attention! Cuteness isn't the core issue!

Is that… how it is in the end…?

In the long run, this could cause significant disruptions to my intelligence gathering.

However, in the short term, it's a good situation.

Ellen was taking me directly to the temple, specifically to the Royal Class dormitory.

Therefore, I had a high chance of encountering Anna de Gerna and seeing what they were up to.

I even frequently came across the B-Class individuals who were back at the temple.

So, considering the information gathering I need right now, there's no better situation.

Although it's frustrating that I can't scout the military base in the long run.

Staying in the Royal Class dormitory for a few days before being taken to some part of the temple shouldn't make it too difficult for me to leave.

But in that case, when Ellen comes back to see the cat later, I won't be there.

What if someone tries to forcibly keep me in the Royal Class dormitory?

My head is starting to ache.

But what can I do?

It's my fault that the beast became friends with humans and ended up locked in a cage.

I have no choice but to go with the flow.

The temple is far away, and the magic train has stopped running, so Ludwig and Ellen walk silently towards the distant temple.

"Earlier, I saw the Holy Knights gathered with very serious expressions… the Holy Knight Commander was with them too."

"Ah."

"Do you know what happened?"

At Ludwig's question, Ellen nods as if to say she knows the story.

Ellen had access to information going in and out of the general headquarters, so it was inevitable that she and Ludwig would know different things.

"I don't know the details, but… something happened at the Temple Knights' headquarters."

"What happened?"

"Well, I heard the headquarters' graveyard was robbed… something like that."

Rumors were bound to spread to the allied forces' camp, and naturally, it would reach Ellen's ears as well.

No one yet knows how the incident is specifically related to any other events.

Ludwig is taken aback by the unexpected grave robbery story.

"Why would they do that? Who did it?"

"I don't know. So, the Holy Knights probably returned to the Imperial Capital to investigate the incident."

"I see…"

Ludwig nods silently.

They will likely face a commotion to investigate this unexpected and heinous event, including Eleion Bolton.

But our Death Knight has already been replenished.

They will never know that the stolen bones were somehow used by us, and even if they did, it wouldn't change anything. The Holy Knights can't find us anyway.

"Why would they rob the graves? Are there treasures there?"

"I don't know."

It was impossible to tell whether Ellen really didn't know about the situation or was just pretending not to know.

I also couldn't tell whether she knew or didn't know about what the empire was currently doing.

"…"

"…"

Another awkward silence flows between them.

Ellen and Ludwig were not very talkative with each other.

To begin with, they were not close enough to be considered friends.

As they approached the temple's main gate:

"I wish I were as strong as you."

"…"

I lost because I was weak.

I was hurt because I was weak.

Weakness.

Ludwig seemed resentful of his weakness and envious of Ellen's strength, which he could not possess.

"You…"

Ludwig looks at Ellen.

"Do you… plan on getting revenge on Reinhardt…?"

Ellen's eyes widen at the cruel question.

Was he hoping that Ellen would take on his role, since he couldn't do it himself?

She couldn't say no.

She shouldn't give Ludwig that kind of answer.

Regardless of what she was thinking, I secretly hoped Ellen would tell him what he needed to hear.

"I think… someday… we have to… fight…"

In the end, Ellen spoke with a determined expression.

Ludwig wouldn't be satisfied with just that answer from Ellen.

"…I'm sorry. Someone like me shouldn't be asking you… I have no right to say anything…"

But it seemed that he hated his situation more.

The fact that he had to rely on someone else for revenge.

His own weakness.

He hated it more.

So, in a way, I fell for Ellen's scheme.

I couldn't sleep or eat because she kept petting me, and when I woke up, I was trapped in a cage.

I ended up returning to the Imperial Capital, still locked in the cage.

It was unclear whether Ellen had come up with this idea on her own, or if she had reached this conclusion after discussing it with others.

Regardless of who had come up with the idea at the royal class garrison, it was likely that no one would have objected to the decision.

Even if they wanted to see and pet me frequently, they would have thought it was better for me to grow up peacefully in a safe environment rather than a dangerous one.

While this might pose a problem for gathering information in the future, it wouldn't be an issue for me to escape.

As long as nobody imprisoned me, I could return to Edina.

Since I had a teleport scroll prepared for emergencies, I was sure I could do it.

However, I had misunderstood again.

I thought Ellen intended to leave me at the Temple's royal class dormitory.

In reality, Ellen did return to the Temple with Ludwig.

They had to stop briefly at the Temple's main gate.

"Is this the cat that the Hero is raising?"

"Huh? Ah… Yes."

The guard asked Ellen a rather peculiar question.

In any case, Ellen did take me to the royal class dormitory.

However, after Ludwig had returned to the B-class dormitory to sort out his luggage, Ellen arrived at the royal class second-year, A-class dormitory.

"Is this the cat?"

"Yes."

Ellen carefully opened the cage and said, "Take care of it."

In front of my eyes was Emperor Bertus.

Judging from Bertus's expression, it seemed they had already discussed this beforehand?

"Alright, it won't be too difficult."

No. This was too safe!

Was it their intention to have me stay not in the Temple, but in the palace, specifically in Tetra?!

I wouldn't be able to go anywhere if it was too safe like this!

This wouldn't do!

-Meow!

Ellen, surprised by my sudden leap, embraced me as I clung to her chest.

-Meow meow meow meow!

"Wait a moment, it's okay."

Ellen gently pried me away and attempted to place me on Bertus's lap.

-Meow meow meow meow!

"It seems… it doesn't like me?"

"…"

Watching me throw a tantrum, Bertus chuckled while Ellen appeared at a loss for what to do.

This wouldn't do!

The moment I entered the palace, I wouldn't be able to go outside, and everyone in Edina would panic, believing the Demon King had gone missing!

I wasn't the Temple's cat.

Ellen was trying to make me the Emperor's cat.

What if I had been a stray cat that somehow infiltrated the allied forces?

A stray kitten that managed to infiltrate the allied forces would catch the Hero's eye for its cuteness, eventually becoming the Emperor's cat.

It would be an extraordinary rise in status for a creature, not a human.

Although there may not be history in the world of animals, if there were, it would be a noteworthy event in animal journalism.

An overseas topic, yes.

But I was not a cat; I was the Demon King who had transformed into a cat to gather information.

…This seemed even more like an overseas topic?

Anyway, I appreciated their concern, but this wouldn't do.

The Temple would be fine, but the palace was absolutely out of the question.

It wasn't about being in the palace, but about becoming the Emperor's cat.

I would undoubtedly be completely tied down.

Ellen was trying to ensure I could live in the safest place in the world.

Moreover, Bertus didn't seem to have any intention of refusing Ellen's request.

This wouldn't do.

I used every means at my disposal.

Ellen tried to force me into Bertus' arms or make me sit on his lap, but I twisted and writhed like mad, crying and even baring my teeth.

"I didn't know I was such a person who couldn't be loved by an animal."

Somehow, Bertus seemed hurt.

No.

It's not like that…

“…Why is this happening?"

Ellen, as if upset, began to stroke the insane cat that was baring its teeth at the emperor, the most dignified human being, while it sat on her lap.

It must be because it's an animal and doesn't know any better. They both seem to understand it that way.

Ellen won't be able to push me onto Bertus since I hate it so much.

If they really try to force me into his arms, I'll have to escape using my power, even if I have to revert to my true form.

What would happen afterward, whether it's a fight or something else, is horrifying to imagine.

In any case, it's a rare sight.

Somehow, I got to see Bertus and Ellen having an exclusive conversation, and there was no doubt or suspicion about it.

"I could have gone to the palace."

The emperor is someone who calls people, not someone who goes to meet them.

Even if Ellen is special, it would have been more convenient for her to come to the palace, especially if she was on her way to entrust the cat to him.

"Ah, I had some matters to check at the temple, so I've been here for a few days."

Is the matter he's referring to related to the experiment I'm thinking of?

Is it true that the experiment is taking place at the temple and Bertus is checking it?

But this conversation alone serves as a clue.

If Ellen knew about this subject, there would be no need for Bertus to beat around the bush with the phrase "matters to check."

"I see."

Ellen's response didn't seem to show much curiosity about what the matter was, making it clear that she didn't know.

Whether that's a good thing or a bad thing, I'm not sure.

But it was evident that Bertus didn't think it would be good for Ellen to know about such matters.

"Ellen, it's not like you're going back right away. It's okay if you spend the winter here. Serandia's surroundings can't be considered absolutely safe, but you've suffered the most in cleaning up the nearby area. And you haven't had a proper break so far, have you? It seems like this cat has no intention of being raised by me

anyway. Wouldn't it be better if you took care of it here for a while?"

-Meow

Good point.

"…"

Ellen silently tickled the back of my head.

You're saying that after working the hardest, she hasn't even had a break?

After the battle of Serandia, Ellen had been busy cleaning up the monsters in the area without a moment's rest.

But now that it's mostly wrapped up, there's no need for her to stay at the garrison waiting for her next mission.

It seemed that Ellen had originally planned to entrust me to Bertus and return to the allied forces' garrison right away.

"It's been a while since you've been at the dormitory. Take a break while you're here."

Bertus had met Ellen at the dormitory, not the palace.

That was partly because Bertus had been at the temple for a few days, but it also seemed like he intended for Ellen to rest at the dormitory while she was back.

"Can I really do this?"

"Who else but you can?"

On Ellen's lap, she placed her hand on my waist and looked down at me, speaking quietly.

"Do I even deserve to…"

The guilt and self-reproach in her eyes were clearly conveyed.

Ellen's relentless activity and refusal to give herself a break were partly due to her guilt and self-blame.

For a while, Bertus remained silent.

"It feels like everything that's happened… all of it… is my fault."

I knew Ellen blamed herself for Delphin's death and the incident with Ludwig as well. I silently looked up at Ellen's eyes, which were becoming translucent.

Ellen.

Bertus.

And me.

The people at the heart of the Gate Incident were all gathered here.

"If we start debating who's to blame and who's the problem, there's no end to it."

"…"

"Even if I blame myself, thinking all this might be my fault, it doesn't end the Gate Incident. Being hard on yourself won't bring an end to everything."

"…"

"We've seen how weak humans are."

We faced humans dying so easily every day.

Humans are so easily broken, dying and getting hurt.

"You're strong, but in the end, you're human too."

"…"

"You're breaking too."

At Bertus' words, Ellen tightly gripped the amulet around her neck.

"So take a break during the winter. You don't have to be with the Allied Forces to survive the winter, and if the Allied Forces collapse without you, then they had no meaning to begin with. The Allied Forces need warriors at their best, not on the brink. To be that, you need to rest when you should."

"…"

"There's no such thing as a human who doesn't get tired. Now's the time for you to rest."

"…Yeah."

Fighting and throwing oneself into battles, focusing only on what's directly ahead, humans wear down, and Ellen was no exception.

The Allied Forces don't need a vulnerable warrior.

A warrior who recovers body and mind during the winter, returning at full strength.

Ellen seemed unable to refute Bertus' words, nodding her head while still holding the amulet.

It had been a long time since I'd heard Bertus speak directly.

I knew he had changed, but seeing it firsthand was strange.

Bertus, who had been a villain, was now someone I couldn't see that way no matter how hard I tried.

From the beginning, Bertus was hardly ever a villain in my eyes during the time we spent in the temple. The closest moment was just before the Gate Incident, but that didn't happen because Bertus was a villain.

After the Gate Incident, Bertus always seemed to live without the mask he used to wear.

From such Bertus, I could feel guilt, self-reproach, and a sense of responsibility.

However, what's even more horrifying is that Bertus, when he was a villain, never did such things.

It's assumed that Bertus, no longer a villain, is now committing even more terrible deeds.

"I'll take a break. I need to talk to Ludwig."

"Alright."

Bertus left his seat after leaving those words behind.

Fortunately, there was no incident of being dragged to the Imperial City of Emperatos.

Ellen looked at me with her head bowed.

"I wish I could've…"

Ellen spoke in a voice tinged with sadness.

"I can't… always… be with you."

There were several layers of meaning to her words.

Even though she had agreed to take some time off, she would eventually have to return to the Allied Forces' base.

It also meant that Ellen didn't have much time to look after a small creature.

And ultimately, it was about her existence disappearing altogether.

Ellen couldn't always be with me, so she found someone who could, and that person was Bertus.

-Meow

"…What should I do?"

In the end, Ellen sighed deeply and embraced me.

CHAPTER 565

The Royal Class Dormitory was home to the students who had decided to spend their winter there and had obtained permission to do so.

However, not all of them had returned, and some were unable to come back, so the place did not seem crowded.

After all, the Royal Class Dormitory had a capacity of only 120 people.

There were not many people to begin with, and there were even fewer now, so the atmosphere was quite tranquil.

Ludwig unpacked his belongings in his dormitory room, which he hadn't seen in a long time. He didn't have many possessions, nor were they particularly valuable.

After casually unpacking, Ludwig left his room and encountered someone.

"Ludwig…”

"Ah, Detto. It's been a while."

Dettomorian, who usually looked pale, stared silently at Ludwig's nonexistent right arm.

“…I heard about it."

"I somehow ended up like this."

Ludwig scratched his head with his left arm and gave an awkward smile.

Dettomorian was not surprised, as he had already heard the news about Ludwig and Delphin from the others who had returned earlier.

"Have you been well?"

"As for me… Nothing happened…”

At Dettomorian's words, Ludwig nodded his head as if relieved. He looked around the quiet B-Class Dormitory hallway.

Only Dettomorian was passing by.

"What about the others?"

"They seem to be busy with their research."

"I see. They didn't come back for a break…"

Louis, Christina, and Anna had returned to the dormitory not long ago.

Unlike Ludwig, who had been assigned to the rear, the three of them had returned to the dormitory because they had tasks to complete.

It was different for him.

Unlike Ludwig, who was forcibly left at the temple by the royal command, they would be deployed to the Allied Forces' frontlines if needed.

And then, the owner of that royal command.

"It seems you're back."

Bertus raised his hand to Ludwig as he entered the B-Class Dormitory hallway.

Dettomorian left for the club building, saying he had things to do, leaving only Ludwig and Bertus in the B-Class Dormitory.

After becoming Emperor, Bertus had little opportunity to meet his classmates, except for a few of them.

The person Bertus saw most frequently was not Ellen but Evia from B-7, a telepathic ability user, who was stationed at the headquarters as a liaison.

Next was Ellen, and then those involved in magic research.

So it had been quite some time since Ludwig and Bertus had seen each other's faces.

"Just be comfortable around me. I like it that way."

"Ah, um… Okay."

As Ludwig seemed unsure of what to do, he scratched the back of his head with an awkward smile.

"Thanks… for caring."

Ludwig felt he had to say that, as the Emperor himself had ordered his return to the temple.

"You don't look grateful at all."

"…"

To anyone watching, Ludwig seemed more desperate about his situation than grateful. It only looked like he was saying that because he had to.

"…No, really. I am grateful."

"I understand your desire to fight more. I also know that in your current state, you're still far more capable than any ordinary soldier. But… you're not an ordinary soldier."

"…I know what you mean."

It was true that most ordinary soldiers were treated as expendable and died meaninglessly in battle.

However, even those ordinary soldiers, if they were injured and managed to survive, would not be sent back into battle.

Ludwig still had the strength to fight, but as a highly important Royal-class soldier, his death would significantly dampen the morale of the entire Royal class. That's why he was forcibly sent to the rear, and Ludwig knew this all too well. It was just a bitter pill to swallow.

No longer able to fight and being a burden to his peers, he had to retreat to the rear

lines.

"It's a shame about Delphin… I didn't get to talk to her much, but I heard she was a good friend."

"…"

Bertus didn't know Delphin well, but Ludwig had countless memories with Delphin Izzard. He had helplessly witnessed the death of such a precious person right before his eyes. It was both Ludwig's nightmare and reality.

"It's all my fault."

"…What?"

"Delphin got hurt trying to help me, so it's all my fault."

Ludwig muttered with a blank stare.

"I'm weak… It's all my fault."

Bertus silently watched Ludwig blame himself.

Everyone was feeling guilty, and like Bertus, Ludwig was blaming himself in this situation. Bertus was about to say that it couldn't be helped or that they at least managed to save Scarlett, but he closed his mouth.

Ludwig was broken.

It wasn't a particularly special or rare occurrence.

Like everyone else, Ludwig was going through the same process.

Having retreated from the battlefield, he would slowly decay in the depths of his powerlessness.

What Ludwig needed wasn't sympathy or comfort.

"There are plenty of things that need to be done in the Empire, and there are many places where you're needed."

He needed to understand that he could find his purpose outside the battlefield.

"I'll find you a place in the guard. It's not official, but give it a try. We'll decide later whether you're suitable for the job or not."

He needed to feel that he wasn't powerless.

At the moment, Ellen was the only one in the second-year A-class dormitory.

Of course, the number of people residing in the Royal class was small.

That's why meals were not taken in the Royal class dormitory but in the large banquet hall within the general dormitory, where students from different years mingled during mealtime.

Ellen used to eat a lot.

However, on the battlefield, there was no time, and food was a scarce resource.

So, Ellen ate less on the battlefield, where she needed to eat more, than ordinary soldiers did.

-Om nom nom

Perhaps because it had been a while since she'd been in a comfortable place, Ellen ate quite a lot, though not as much as she used to.

The quality of meals in the Temple Royal class had significantly decreased after the Gate incident.

Therefore, Ellen didn't eat as voraciously as she used to.

-Nom nom

Still, seeing her eat her fill after a long time made him feel good.

…But thinking about it, it's like a pet feeling happy to see its owner eat well. Isn't that an absurd situation?

Anyway, what could he do with this feeling of satisfaction?

She fought on the battlefield, eating like a bird.

Was Ellen actually fuel-efficient?

"Ellen, you brought the cat?"

"Yes."

"It's good for him too, being raised here. Good thinking. Ellen, are you resting here too?"

"For the time being."

"That's right. You need some rest."

And so, the other Royal-class members he encountered at the allied forces' base would recognize him, stroke him a few times, or strike up a conversation with Ellen.

—---

I sat beside Ellen, who was sitting at a long rectangular table.

Ellen handed me a sausage, perhaps to take care of my meal, and I nibbled on it.

It might have a strange shape, but it's still fit for human consumption.

Of course, I hadn't followed her to the dining hall just to get a measly sausage.

I was looking for the B-class individuals.

First, Anna de Gerna.

Not here.

Secondly, Christina and Louis Ancton.

Not here either.

The only B-class individuals present were Ludwig and Dettomorian.

I had thought I would see Anna, Christina, and Louis Ancton if I went to the dormitory, but I couldn't catch a glimpse of them.

I couldn't lead the conversation, so unless their names were mentioned, I had no way of knowing what was going on.

Someone, please talk!

Anna, Christina, Louis.

Can someone please ask where they are?

“Detto, are Louis and the others in the lab? Eating there? Haven't seen them for a while.”

“Maybe……”

“Are they staying there then? Isn't that too much?”

“They come back every few days…”

Ludwig!

You're the best.

So they are here!

I was just fooling around.

Seeing my situation objectively, there was nothing else I could say.

A few days after returning to the temple.

I had been just playing around.

-Tap tap

As if to beckon me over, Ellen sat down on the bench and tapped the seat beside her with her palm. I lightly leaped and settled on the bench.

-Meow

Other than following Ellen on her walks, I had nothing to do.

Fortunately, Ellen didn't hand me over to Bertus and return to the allied forces.

It seemed like she was taking a long-awaited break at the temple as well.

Originally, I planned to gather information.

But I couldn't, even if I wanted to.

Firstly, Ellen always took me with her, and secondly, the B-class individuals, excluding Dettomorian and Ludwig, hardly returned to the dormitory.

It was certain that the three were in the temple, but it was difficult to see their faces.

I wondered if they were in a research lab or something similar.

And I had a rough idea of where that might be.

The fact that I couldn't see the three I was looking for was enough information on its own.

The fact that none of them came back one by one, but left and didn't return simultaneously, meant they were together.

So, I knew that all three of them were involved in the empire's secret research.

Secret research related to the remains of a warrior.

In Louis's case, his exceptional understanding of all fields of magic made sense for the project.

I could guess Anna's talent, dark magic.

But Christina's talent, alchemy.

I couldn't understand why an alchemist was needed.

What on earth were they doing?

For now, I decided to observe the situation instead of blatantly doing something suspicious or returning to human form to investigate or scout.

In Edina, it was said that I had plenty of time to gather information, so I didn't have to worry about that place for now.

So, all I did was watch Ellen resting, as I had nothing else to do.

Sometimes, she lost consciousness and spaced out for a while, but there was no attempt to leave the temple. When Ellen was like that, she would sit absentmindedly for some time before regaining her senses.

"I used to come here often."

-Meow

The hill of the Temple walkway

It was a place often run as a training course.

Adriana and I had run there frequently, countless times on my own, and many times with Ellen as well.

Ellen gazed down at the scenery below the hill with a faint and distant look in her eyes.

It seemed like I didn't need her to say what she was thinking – I could already tell.

She was probably thinking the same thing as me.

Rest was also a strategy.

Such words were used in the military.

Managing fatigue was naturally a very important matter for maintaining the combat effectiveness of the military, so rest also occupied a very important part of military operations. It was only natural.

Thus, saying that rest was also a strategy was not just a saying – it was actually a very important strategy.

Ellen, responsible for reconnaissance and annihilation in most battles, always took the lead. When occupying somewhere, she went out to pacify the surrounding area, returning last.

She was the first to dive into the battlefield and the last to return.

Of course, there were days of rest in between, but Ellen would have always dashed out if she received a call from the headquarters, even if she were sleeping.

Now Ellen was resting.

She had fully accepted Berthus's words that she must rest.

Just as Ludwig had been forced to return from the rear of the battlefield for the sake of others.

For the sake of others, Ellen accepted that she must rest.

It wasn't maintaining tension on the battlefield, falling asleep on a makeshift bed.

She was safe and sound, unaware of the world in her own room, wearing loose pajamas, and no one looking for her.

Ellen not only ate, but also slept a lot.

As if trying to catch up on all the sleep she hadn't been able to get. As if trying to get all the sleep now that she wouldn't be able to get later.

She slept for over twelve hours a day, sometimes missing meal times, and even took naps.

Just how exhausted must she have been?

It wasn't just an allied forces issue.

Since the Gate Incident, Ellen had been constantly dragged into battles with monsters.

From one place to another, from one battlefield to another.

Relentlessly thrown into battles and annihilating monsters.

It was as if Ellen was taking a proper rest for the first time in almost three years since the Gate Incident.

I had been busy since the Gate Incident as well, but I hadn't been constantly fighting. In fact, I had spent more days dealing with Edina's internal affairs.

Moreover, hadn't I taken a very long break in Rezaira?

But Ellen had to keep fighting and fighting.

Ellen was asleep, hugging the blanket as if she were dead.

Resting properly for such a long period was probably the first time for Ellen since the Gate Incident.

So it couldn't be helped that she slept like the dead, as if to dissipate the fatigue accumulated in her soul.

Ellen's door was slightly ajar.

Because if it were closed, it would feel like I was trapped. After waking from a long sleep, Ellen apologized for seeing me still sitting in the room and has since left the door slightly open when she sleeps.

As if to say, come and go as you please.

In any case, there was no one in the A-Class dormitory to look for Ellen.

She seemed to know that I would be back soon if I go out, so she didn't intend to confine me.

Of course, Ellen probably didn't know that she shouldn't actually raise a cat like that.

The time was early evening.

I should go to the B-Class dormitory once.

The three that I was looking for might have returned today.

CHAPTER 566

In the middle of the night at the B-class dormitory.

"Ludwig…”

"You're back."

There sat Christina, Louis Ancton, and Anna de Gerna.

And also Dettomorian and Ludwig.

The five of them were gathered around.

"I'm fine. I still feel like there's something I can do."

Ludwig had started working for the guard, leaving the temple early in the morning and staying out all day before returning.

It was unclear if it was due to Bertus' influence, but Ludwig had found new work to do, and the despair on his face had largely disappeared.

To overcome despair, one must do something.

Perhaps, in time, Ludwig would regain some of his former brightness.

"Huh? Who's this…?"

"Meow."

As I approached, Christina's eyes widened.

It was only natural that the three of them would be surprised to see a cat that should have been at the Allied Forces' base here.

"Ellen brought him. She's resting in the A-class dormitory now. I think we'll end up taking care of him here."

At Ludwig's explanation, all three of them nodded in agreement.

"Ah, I see…"

Anna stared at me intently before suddenly picking me up and placing me on her lap.

…Somehow.

Had I gotten too used to sitting on someone's lap?

I've been transformed for too long. Will I struggle to adapt when I return to human form?

These three.

Seeing that they all returned on the same day, it was clear that they were working on the same project.

They all sat together and talked at length about Ludwig's injury, Delphin's death, and other matters. I sat quietly on Anna's lap and listened to their conversation.

Ludwig didn't cry as he spoke.

However, just because he didn't cry didn't mean he wasn't sad.

Rather than being used to saying goodbye, it seemed as though he didn't know how to express his sadness.

Ludwig believed that Delphin had died because he was weak.

Of course, no one said that Delphin's death was Ludwig's fault.

Cliffman had spoken with a hint of blame toward Ludwig to make him give up on Delphin, but Cliffman probably didn't really believe it either.

Of course, it wasn't Ludwig's fault.

But if Ludwig hadn't tried to save Scarlett, Scarlett would have died, and Delphin and Ludwig would have survived.

However, if Scarlett had died, Ludwig would still have blamed himself.

He would have blamed himself for not saving Scarlett, leading to her death. In that case, he wouldn't have lost his arm.

Blame and responsibility are difficult and ultimately unhelpful.

If we were to go by that logic, Delphin wouldn't have died if I hadn't existed.

To begin with, if there hadn't been a Valier Junior, the Gate incident wouldn't have occurred, and none of these events would have been necessary.

Because of my incomplete knowledge of the future, I had to face the very future I was trying to avoid.

When would these painful stories of self-blame ever end?

It's not possible for everyone to be happy, but can the remaining people at least find a happy ending?

I watched as they shared their sadness and consoled each other's emotions.

"So, you joined the guard?"

At Louis's question, Ludwig nodded vaguely.

“To put it precisely, I wouldn't say I've become a patrol guard… but I'm helping with the patrol duties. Things like… well, patrols."

Ludwig had been assisting the patrol guards for a few days, and given his nature, he would have chosen to go to the most dangerous places.

So, he must have seen the reality of the refugee area with his own eyes.

"Is the monster issue in the refugee area… really that serious?"

"It's not that it's not serious… but I heard it's not as bad as before. The real problem… isn't the monsters."

"If it's not the monsters, then what?"

At Christina's question, Ludwig's expression darkened.

"It's not just the starvation… it's the people."

Everyone seemed to understand what he meant, and their expressions soured.

Crime.

And hunger.

The problem in the refugee area was not the monsters, but the people.

Ludwig seemed reluctant to say more.

He must have seen the truth that life is desperate and miserable everywhere, and talking about it here wouldn't solve the problem.

"Anyway, you must be quite busy? I see you rarely come back to the dormitory."

Trying to change the subject, Ludwig mentioned the very thing I had been waiting for.

Research.

As the topic came up, Christina quietly nodded her head.

"Well, yes."

Christina said so, but Anna and Louis' expressions were not good. That alone was enough of a clue.

I'd like to ask more questions. Of course, they won't open up, but just looking at their reactions would give me enough clues.

"What kind of research are you doing back at the temple? Are you creating something like a Titan again?"

If something like a Titan were to be created, the war would proceed more smoothly, and Ludwig, who could no longer participate, looked excited.

No.

You foolish child…

How could an alchemist and a dark mage create a giant weapon?

Don't you even know the difference between magic crafting and alchemy?

"No, that's not our field… It's the same as usual. Improving Moonshine and stuff like that."

"Ah… I see."

It was a clear lie.

I confirmed that all three of them were involved in the same research project.

And Christina, as their representative, lied, and Ludwig didn't notice. Naturally, since only a very few people knew the circumstances of the disappearing corpses, Ludwig couldn't detect such a lie.

In the first place, he couldn't even think of suspecting his friends, so he just nodded.

However.

The one who had been silent all this time.

“…….Really?"

Dettomorian looked at Christina with a gloomy gaze and tilted his head slightly.

"Huh? What do you mean by 'really'?"

"It can't be…”

Dettomorian muttered quietly.

And not only Christina but also Louis and Anna's faces turned pale.

I felt a chill running down my spine.

No, it really felt like the hair on my body was standing on end.

This bastard Dettomorian.

He doesn't know anything, but is he guessing this by instinct?

Under Dettomorian's piercing gaze, Christina's face turned white.

"Well… I guess you have your thoughts…”

He gave a hint of knowing something, but as if he wouldn't pry unless she told him directly, he groaned and got up, then headed to his room, mumbling as usual.

Ludwig looked confused, glancing alternately between his three friends with pale faces and Dettomorian.

"Detto… What is he talking about?"

"Well, you know Detto. He's always been like that, hasn't he?"

As if she'd never been flustered, Christina's expression changed in an instant.

Calm and composed, as if nothing had happened.

"True, but…”

Indeed, Dettomorian often spoke in vague, cryptic terms, but Ludwig didn't seem to doubt him.

That's just how he was.

With that, they let it go.

Dettomorian.

He wasn't a bad guy, but he couldn't help but seem shady.

Ludwig didn't fully understand the situation, and Dettomorian seemed to have an attitude of letting the three of them conduct their research however they saw fit.

After that, Ludwig went to his room, saying he needed to sleep early for work tomorrow.

"…"

"…"

"…"

In silence, I watched as Christina, Louis, and Anna exchanged glances.

Now, only the three of them remained.

Wouldn't talk about the research begin now?

But they only exchanged glances, without having any conversation.

"Let's all go rest."

“…Okay."

"We should, indeed."

Had they decided not to mention the research topic at all outside?

After that brief exchange, the three dispersed.

At night, when everyone was asleep, I left the Royal Class dormitory in my cat form.

I was able to observe the three I sought, and I was sure that their research project was confidential.

But my inference was merely a certainty.

I still knew nothing about what they were actually doing.

Even if those three were core researchers, like the Titan Project, the project would certainly involve a significant number of other mages.

In fact, I knew where to go without even following the three.

It's impossible for them to conduct such research outside the temple, which has the most secure protection. It's not like they would carry out such a project outside the temple.

The Titan Project was developed in a moving ally base.

It must have been a pretty harsh environment, so the fact that Titan succeeded in its first operation was nothing short of a miracle.

However, there was no need for the research environment to be harsh.

Titan, being an excessively large, giant weapon, must have had no choice but to develop it on the moving frontlines of the coalition.

If not for that, Titan would naturally have been developed in a stable environment.

Since it's certain that the research is underway in the temple, I don't need to follow the B-class trio to know where the location is.

Where would the best research environment in the temple be?

The Temple University.

Of course, the Magic University Research Building within.

It's obvious that research is underway somewhere there.

Knowing this, the reason I haven't gone there yet is simple.

-…

The Temple Magic University, which I reached after running through the night, had completely controlled access.

Temple guards were present near the facility, and there were also guards monitoring the entrances to each research building.

Their numbers were astonishing.

Even an outsider would think something was going on inside, given the number of guards.

So strict that it almost gave it away.

Entering that area is entirely possible.

There was no chance the guards would chase away a single cat.

The important thing was, in this form, I could only roam around the research facility grounds.

Entering the building itself would be impossible.

Rather, any stray animal attempting to enter would be chased away. Regardless of whether I seemed suspicious or not, it was only natural since an animal might accidentally tamper with sensitive equipment.

Roaming around these grounds wouldn't yield any useful information.

That's why, even though I knew the project was being conducted here, I didn't bother coming and instead waited for the three of them to leak information outside.

However, whether they've been sworn to secrecy or not, the three of them never discuss the research.

Somewhere in the Temple Magic University Research Building.

A massive project, on par with the Titan Project, is being conducted here.

How on earth can I find out what they were doing?

I can't involve Kono Lint.

I told him not to investigate it with my own mouth, and this was clearly a dangerous matter.

Making him aware of this would only put him in danger.

Transforming into an insect was not possible. Well, it might be doable, but

controlling it would be impossible.

It took me ages to adapt to being a cat, and I have no idea how to become an insect.

Should I call Sarkegaar over?

However, even the vicinity of this area was under strict security.

The area where the research was directly conducted will undoubtedly be under tight control, not only in terms of personnel but also the environment itself.

The chances were high that they have created a highly controlled environment, one that would not even tolerate an insect crawling around.

Could Sarkegaar find a way even in that situation?

Using force was obviously not an option.

Of course, if I thought about it, I could enter right away.

Christina, Anna, Louis.

If I transform into one of the three, I could enter immediately.

However, that was obviously the worst of the worst plans.

It was frustrating.

It was so frustrating that I just wanted to grab Bertus by the scruff of his neck and asked him what he was doing.

Of course, if I were going to do that, I would have contacted him earlier, so it was too late for that. It was ridiculous for me to ask him what he was doing when I created the Death Knight in the first place, and even if I grabbed him by the neck and threatened him, he won't give up on this matter just like the Empire wouldn't have any reason to give up on the Titan.

What can I do?

At this point, it wouldn't be a big problem if I just pretended not to know and

assumed that the Empire would take care of it. After all, the research here was likely a project prepared for the current war.

However, just as everyone in Edina worried about what would happen if the Titan turned against us, even if it wouldn't.

The research being conducted here could potentially become a threat to us later, and the situation was uncertain.

If it were a simple matter like creating a Death Knight as we did, I might not even have to go this far to investigate.

But alchemy followed dark magic.

These connections didn't mesh together.

It seemed like more complex research was being conducted than I initially thought.

And I couldn't figure out what it was.

Brooding over it alone won't help me find a breakthrough.

I gave up.

I'll head back to Edina for a while and then return.

CHAPTER 567

Deciding on it was the problem; in truth, returning to Edina wouldn't take long.

Sneaking into the temple was entirely possible in my beast form.

Not because I was a beast, but from the start, when I passed through the gate, there seemed to be rumors among the guards that I was Ellen's cat.

It felt like I had received some sort of intangible temple pass.

Once out of the temple, I could immediately return to Edina using the teleport scroll Harriet had created herself.

The scroll was precious, but since Harriet didn't even know I was taken to the temple, I couldn't call her here.

It was a common occurrence for me to suddenly disappear after leaving Charlotte in charge and then return, so no one was particularly startled.

Naturally, the first person I sought out was Harriet.

Despite it being bedtime for most, Harriet was in her study, peering at something.

If no one told her to rest, she wouldn't know when to stop.

After being absent for a while, I reappeared, and Harriet explained the general situation in Edina, saying nothing particularly significant had happened during that time.

“…You were dragged all the way to the temple?"

“…Yeah."

Upon hearing about my experiences in the Allied Forces' camp and my current cat mode, Harriet let out a disbelieving laugh.

"Locked in a cage?"

"Uh… yeah."

"You've become a pet…"

Harriet said, sounding disturbed, and I couldn't find any words to argue.

"So, do you have to stay as a cat for a longer period?"

"I already am…"

"Ah."

"In fact, even now, it's a bit awkward."

"…Is it that bad?"

"Yeah. I wonder why humans are so tall."

"…Wow."

Having spent almost a week in a low perspective, returning to my human form felt like the ground was swaying.

Being human felt strange!

In Harriet's study, I shared as much as I had learned about what had been going on.

I had thought it was merely reviving the dead through dark magic, but the alchemist Christina was involved in a research project.

"Alchemy seems to be involved…"

"What on earth could it be? What does reviving corpses have to do with an alchemist?"

"Alchemy is an area with many prohibitions, almost as much as dark magic… In fact, alchemists are more likely to go mad than dark mages."

“…Really?"

"Yes, remember Aaron Mede?"

“…Right."

Indeed, Aaron Mede, who had been a low-ranking member of the Black Order, was more of an alchemist than a dark mage.

"There are many alchemical practices related to dark magic as well… So they're not incompatible magical systems. If anything, they're related."

So, it was a case of birds of a feather flocking together.

It was absurd to dabble in forbidden alchemy without touching dark magic or vice versa.

If they were conducting research beyond the morals of the world, they would break all taboos.

Hence, there were alchemical practices based on dark magic and dark magic based on alchemy.

This case must be related to that.

"So, in your opinion, what do you think the Empire is up to?"

At my calm question, Harriet's eyes widened.

"How am I supposed to know that?"

“…Right."

I had such faith in her that it seemed as if she would know all the answers as long as the topic was magic…

Admittedly, it had been quite absurd for Harriet to act as an answer vending machine up until now.

"There aren't enough clues. Even if alchemy and dark magic are involved, the topics

are too broad."

They seemed to be doing something nefarious with their magic, but what kind of magic could it be?

That was almost the level of the question.

"Resurrecting the dead and alchemy…"

Harriet tried to think it through but, in the end, no sharp ideas came to mind.

"It's difficult to think about them together. Separately, maybe, but not together."

"Do you understand them separately?"

"If it's dark magic, it's probably related to the undead and a related curse. As for alchemy, we've created things like Moonshine and enhancement potions."

Harriet also contemplated the lack of connections between the two.

"I'll try to think about it in my own way. Perhaps the Elders will catch on to something."

Truth be told, it was a bit ridiculous for me to return late at night and demand answers like some sort of night owl.

"Are you going straight back to the Imperial Capital? You're not Reinhardt right now, but Ellen's cat. Isn't Ellen worried about her missing cat?"

Harriet spoke with a smirk, covering her mouth with her hand.

"…Are you doing that on purpose?"

"Of course."

Harriet chuckled as if she found my transformation into a pet amusing.

"Or, can't you stay with me tonight, as long as you stay in cat form? I'll send you early tomorrow."

“…What?"

"Why, why not!"

“Stop it!”

“It's my fault!”

"Quickly. Come on? I'll hold you tight."

Harriet spread her arms wide, as if beckoning me to come and be embraced.

You!

Did you think of me as a completely separate creature when I was a cat?

Why was it you, not me, who has this double standard?

“…Please, no."

"Why, don't you like me? Is that it?"

"No… it's not that… you know it's not that…”

"Then hurry! Hurry up!"

At some point, it had become this way.

I ended up obliged to most of what our blockhead said.

Originally, our human relationship wasn't like this, but at some point, it completely reversed, and I can't do anything about it!

What went wrong, and when?

In the end…

Well…

That's how…

I ended up receiving a lot of affection.

Late at night.

The Allied Forces' base.

Kernstadt Army Command Post.

Louise von Schwarz was reviewing numerous documents by the light of a single lantern.

During battles, Louise von Schwarz was busy with combat and command; in non-battle situations, she was occupied overseeing the overall situation of the army.

Both mental and physical labor became more demanding the higher one went, making it difficult for anyone in the Allied Forces to have proper rest.

Busy with physical labor were Ellen Artorius and Saviolin Turner.

Busy with mental labor was the Emperor Bertus de Gardias of the Empire.

But Louise von Schwarz was both a master-class warrior and a commander.

Thus, it wouldn't be an exaggeration to say that she was the busiest person throughout the entire Allied Forces.

Heinrich von Schwarz had been watching Louise's busy state even after the occupation of Serandia.

He had already reported on the situation at the Royal-class base, and Heinrich had already witnessed the losses brought on by this war.

It was a wretched situation, but those who survived had to do something because they were alive.

Now.

Heinrich von Schwarz was peering intensely with his eyes, so much so that it seemed

blood might appear in his eyes.

Although it was long past the time they should be asleep.

In the command post tent where only the two of them were present, the quiet sound of flipping through documents echoed.

In truth, Heinrich's examination of the documents didn't necessarily speed up the work.

But those documents provided an overview of the entire situation of the Kernstadt army.

The state of the troops, the supplies, the provisioning plan, the minimum required amount of supplies for wintering, and so on.

The very act of understanding those documents held meaning in itself.

Louise glanced at the documents and then stared blankly at the side.

Her eyes were focused, but her gaze was vacant.

Louise now knew.

Her son was weak at using his head.

Dealing with numbers wasn't just about memorizing them.

It was about deciding what was necessary, what was lacking, what was sufficient, and how to manage the limited resources and troops. It was also important to discern whether the reports from each unit commander were genuine.

It was a task of reading between the lines of the numbers.

Yet, Heinrich's actions seemed too instinctive, as if he was merely trying to memorize the numbers.

His demeanor was too awkward.

And, too adorable.

Louise occasionally felt as if she would burst into laughter.

Of course, she wasn't disappointed.

Wasn't it enough to have at least one outstanding skill?

There were plenty of people who had none.

Heinrich wasn't acting this way because he knew he was the true heir to the Schwarz royal family.

Nor was he behaving this way out of ambition or aspiration, as if he had to learn these things.

He simply wanted to be helpful.

Louise knew that it was just that one intention driving him.

That's why, the sight of him trying to do something he didn't know how to do was rather endearing.

"Why don't you go in and rest? You must be tired."

“...I'm still fine."

The lack of personal conversation between them remained the same.

But, little by little, something was changing.

If things continue to change like this until the end of the war,

Maybe they could become a normal parent-child relationship eventually.

Louise found that amusing.

Neither of them could be considered normal, yet what they both ultimately wanted was something ordinary.

And Louise still hadn't had a proper conversation with her son.

“…My youngest."

"Yes?"

"Your friends' situation… didn't turn out well."

Louise had also heard about the situation at the Royal Class garrison.

Although it wasn't something she needed to worry about, she knew Heinrich cared about that matter, so she had heard the news.

Death and injury were commonplace on the battlefield, but how could one's heart be at ease when their friends experienced such things?

At Louise's words, Heinrich seemed momentarily stunned before letting out a bitter laugh.

"What can we do…”

His words were mixed with self-mockery and resignation.

Despite doing everything they could, there were still things that were unavoidable.

It was sad, but he seemed to avoid thinking too deeply about it.

Because the very act of thinking was painful, he turned away as if to flee from it.

"Thank you, sister."

Heinrich smiled wistfully and went back to examining the documents.

In conclusion,

Louise felt a sense of pride when she saw this side of her son.

Ultimately, it was a cold truth that it wouldn't be of any help.

Just as she hadn't been able to rest for a long time, her son hadn't either.

This winter would probably be their last respite.

"Not everyone is allowed, but you know that there are those who have been granted permission to return to the Empire or their hometowns during the winter."

“…Yes."

Assuming their hometowns were safe, of course.

During this long break, the Allied Forces had been unusually selecting people to take extended leave.

"Go back to the Temple for a while."

“…Pardon?"

As if hearing an unexpected proposal, Heinrich looked at Louise with a stunned expression.

"It means you should go and rest. The great battles are over, and you haven't had a break in a long time. You deserve it."

Heinrich seemed rather flustered by this sudden leave order.

"I'm fine, sister. There might be an emergency, so I'd rather stay here to be prepared…”

While Louise appreciated her son's thoughtfulness, she knew that he didn't just want to rest.

"The King will be visiting soon."

"!"

The man who he thought was his father but was actually his grandfather.

Constantine von Schwarz would be visiting the battlefield as the situation stabilized.

Strictly speaking, Louise von Schwarz was the commander of the Kernstadt army, not the King.

"There are things I must explain to His Majesty. Heinrich, it will be an uncomfortable

and dangerous situation for you."

The moment was approaching when the sister, who had murdered her two brothers under the guise of their disappearance, would have to explain the situation to her father.

It was uncertain whether the truth behind the disappearance would be revealed.

However, there was nothing good about Heinrich being present, whether the truth was exposed or not.

"That's why you should get away from here."

This was a brief escape disguised as a vacation.

For both the vacation and the escape.

In the end, ordering him to return to the Temple was an act of consideration from Louise.

"Sister… Will you be alright?"

“…I'll manage."

Although it would be terrible for Louise to either feign ignorance or reveal the truth about the murders of her siblings, she simply said so briefly.

But Heinrich understood that forcibly staying by Louise's side would be of no help to her during the upcoming inspection.

"Let me clarify, it's not about the inspection. I want you to rest."

Heinrich had been constantly on the move for a long time, just like everyone else.

Moreover, Heinrich wasn't even among the superhumans who could do Magic Body Strengthening.

However, his level of activity was even greater than the others, so it was evident that his fatigue had piled up immeasurably.

Louise vaguely thought.

The Temple.

How wonderful it would be to see it with her own eyes just once.

She longed to see the place where her son had spent his entire life.

But her desires were like the wind, and she had a daunting number of duties to attend to.

This winter.

Heinrich would return to a place distant from the battlefield to rest.

However, Louise von Schwarz's place was here.

Who knew?

After the war was over, there might come a day when she could personally set foot in the Temple.

CHAPTER 568

Alchemy and dark magic.

Undead and alchemy.

I couldn't figure out the relevance between the two, and neither could Harriet.

Initially, we decided to call the Sarkegaar from the Allied Forces' base to the Temple. Harriet planned to deduce any meaningful connections between the clues through a meeting with the Council of Elders.

The lord of Saturday, Antirianus.

And the lord of Friday, Luvien.

Both vampire families had long been studying alchemy.

Thus, we could somewhat guess what the empire was planning through the vampire lords.

Whether Sarkegaar breaking into the laboratory came first, or a highly probable inference emerged from the Council of Elders' meeting, we couldn't know.

Ultimately, we needed to find out what possibilities the empire was exploring.

If it could help in the war, that would be great, but it was also important to determine whether it would pose a threat to us later on.

And then.

"Uhm…"

After a long night, I returned to Ellen's room.

Caught by Harriet as a transformed cat, I arrived at the imperial palace still in my feline form since I'd have to change back into a cat anyway.

It was morning.

The warm winter sunlight illuminated Ellen's face.

Lying down, Ellen stretched out as if she were struggling to keep her eyes open.

Trying to wake a dead body, her stretching was almost like convulsions.

From head to toe, stretched out straight, Ellen began to shiver.

-Purr

Was she not going to break something while stretching like this?

Was she having a seizure?

"Uhm… ugh…”

After wriggling for quite some time, Ellen glanced around the room with her eyes wide open, still lying down.

Was she looking for me?

-Meow

"…”

Without even rubbing the sleep from her eyes, Ellen picked me up from the bedside and placed me on her chest, hugging me tightly.

Well…

Honestly.

I'm getting used to it…

This feeling doesn't even make me flustered anymore…

I'm sorry…

"Sleep well…”

-Meow!

No.

Hey!

Was this the flow of waking up?

Ellen closed her eyes and slept for another two hours.

Ellen was as limp as a jellyfish.

It was good to see her completely relaxed, but…

Somehow.

It was as if she had died(?).

Ellen opened her eyes in a disheveled state and sat me down. She hugged her pillow without even properly washing up and stared intently at me.

Despite her total mess, she was still human… and because of that.

Seeing her always sharp self now in such disarray… she was just adorable…

Without saying anything.

Suddenly, she stroked my head and waist for a while.

She poked my nose for a while.

Suddenly, she opened her mouth wide and buried her face in my neck for a while.

It was like she spent the whole day zoning out, staring at a cat, and feeling content.

Aren't you hungry?

-Purr

She kept making that noise.

But it seemed like even eating was a hassle, and Ellen just stared blankly at me.

Was she broken?

Was she ruined?

Was this a sign that the cat should make a gradual exit for a great outcome? Did Ellen become someone who found everything bothersome because of the cat?

In the end, they found themselves in a strange situation, observing each other.

Watching her suddenly pick up the cat and roll around on the bed alone, it seemed that Ellen still had some of her normal self left, and it was a pleasant sight.

She hadn't completely changed, and if she wanted to, she could act like a child at any time.

Still, she couldn't spend the entire day like that, could she?

Grrr

Her stomach growled loudly, but she continued to lounge about.

"I'm hungry…”

She mumbled, but instead of complaining, she should go eat!

In the end, finding herself caught between her reluctance to get up and her hunger, she rolled around in an utterly pitiful state. I gave Ellen's cheek a few playful punches.

Smack, smack!

"???"

Meow!

After getting hit a few times, Ellen's eyes widened as she stared at me intently.

Ellen, rather defiantly, stuck out her cheek as if asking for more.

It seemed that my "cat punch" had backfired.

Want to be scolded?

Haaaa!

“…Fine."

Finally, as if understanding something, Ellen grumbled as she got up and headed to the shower.

After getting up, washing, and changing into her casual clothes, Ellen emerged into the hallway.

Having lazed around for so long, lunchtime was fast approaching. Ellen walked down the hall, checking to make sure I was following.

It seemed that she planned to feed me while eating her own lunch.

There was something different about the A-class dormitory since yesterday.

“…Heinrich?"

"Ah, Ellen."

For some reason, Heinrich seemed to have just arrived.

"I decided to take a break here during the winter."

"I see."

Heinrich glanced at me and nodded, as if he understood the situation. It seemed that a few more would continue to return over the winter.

If this trend continued, in a little more time, everyone might come back to the temple to live.

Ellen pointed her finger not towards the dormitory dining hall, but down the hallway.

"We can eat in the banquet hall. The dormitory dining halls are closed."

"Ah… I see? That makes sense, now that I think about it."

Heinrich seemed to agree with Ellen's explanation and followed her to eat.

I wonder how things are at the Kernstadt military garrison.

Ever since I learned that Louise von Schwarz wouldn't kill Heinrich, I hadn't been concerned about it.

Heinrich's expression didn't seem to be overshadowed by any serious issue, so it seemed there wasn't anything noteworthy.

I don't know much about it, but Louise von Schwarz seemed quite blunt.

Surprisingly, he didn't seem to be causing any trouble either.

Frankly, Heinrich's problems were none of my concern or responsibility anymore.

"You're the only one in our dormitory, right?"

Heinrich probably didn't know the situation of the Royal Class since he was part of the Kernstadt military. Of course, he should know everything he needs to know.

"Yeah."

"What about B-class?"

"Ludwig, Dettomorian, Christina, Anna, and Louis. There should be five of them. I don't know if anyone else came."

"That's quite a lot."

"Yeah."

Heinrich seemed quite surprised that the number of returning B-class members was as high as five.

"Anyway… You must have really taken a liking to him?"

Heinrich alternated between looking at me and Ellen.

"He's cute, isn't he?"

Ellen walked quietly, then suddenly blurted out.

At lunchtime, the banquet hall was devoid of the three researchers. They must have gone to the university research building after breakfast.

Naturally, Ludwig, who was on guard duty, was not there either, nor could Dettomorian be seen, as he was probably doing his own tasks.

"Hmm?"

Heinrich tilted his head when he noticed that none of their classmates were present in the dormitory, despite there being five B-class students in total.

"Where did everyone go?"

Heinrich asked, sitting across from Ellen as he fetched his meal.

"Ludwig is doing guard duty. The other three seem to be working on some kind of magic research. As for Dettomorian… he has his own separate tasks too."

Ellen seemed to know what Dettomorian was doing as well. Heinrich narrowed his eyes upon hearing this.

"Guard duty? With his condition?"

"Yes."

“…I hope he'll be alright?"

Heinrich muttered quietly, seemingly worried that even as a superhuman, Ludwig might not be well-suited for guard duty with his current physical state.

Ellen thought that there would probably be no situation dangerous enough for Ludwig.

Although his combat prowess had decreased, as long as he could still do Magic Body Strengthening and was as skilled as before, he wouldn't be defeated easily. In fact, Ludwig could likely perform the tasks of an entire guard squad with just his left arm, regardless of the overall guard level.

His reputation for excellence wasn't unfounded.

From the moment Ludwig was assigned, he would have been treated as an elite among elites.

Heinrich finished his meal, and I ate the scrambled eggs Ellen had prepared for me.

Accepting food from others had become so natural that it was starting to feel less significant – a dangerous thought.

Anyway, Ellen and Heinrich were back.

With the return of Erich, Cayer, and others, the atmosphere of the old Temple would slowly be restored. Even if it were just a limited break.

"Hmm…”

Heinrich seemed lost in thought as he paused eating during his meal.

"What's wrong?"

At Ellen's question, Heinrich tilted his head.

"Well… I'm just wondering if it's right for me to be idling here."

"…?"

"Ludwig is doing guard duty with his condition, and it feels wrong for me to just relax…"

No.

If you came to rest, then rest! Why try to follow someone who isn't resting?

Just rest when you need to!

If you weren't going to rest, why did you come back here in the first place?

However,

"I was actually thinking about getting active soon too."

It seemed Ellen had the same idea.

I had been wondering why she had been so relaxed today.

Ellen, were you also planning on doing something after resting?

Apparently, today was Ellen's last day of relaxation.

No wonder she had been rolling around so lazily.

Ellen spoke as they bit into a sausage.

"I was planning to take a tour around the outskirts tomorrow. If you could take care of half of it, that would be great."

"Ah, alright. Let's do that."

The guy who wants to work as soon as he returns.

And the person who immediately assigns tasks to such a guy.

-Meow!

"Do you want to come along too?"

-Meow!

As an eating and playing animal, I was the most exasperated one.

Edina Capital Lazak, the royal city.

In the Council of Elders' conference room.

"Dark magic and alchemy. They are, in fact, inseparable."

As soon as the clue from Reinhardt was shared, Antirianus, the Lord of Saturday, revealed a sinister smile.

There were six present in total.

Five Vampire Lords and the scribe, Harriet de Saint Owan.

No more were needed. The subject of this meeting was magic - advanced magic, to be precise.

At Antirianus's words, Harriet twisted her lips, humming in disagreement.

"Is it really inseparable?"

"Don't you, the scribe, know very well that when any magic reaches its pinnacle, the fields inevitably become entwined?"

"I know that, but…"

"Even summoning a meteor requires simultaneous understanding of numerous magic disciplines; otherwise, it's impossible to perform. Alchemy and dark magic are just another example of such a relationship."

When any magic reaches its extreme, not only do two fields become entwined, but multiple fields also get mixed up.

If we were to consider it this way, all magic disciplines might be inseparable from one another.

"However, we need to know what the Empire is planning, not theories or concepts. We know that they are stealing the corpses of past heroes and warriors. Similar to how we resurrected the saints' remains into Death Knights and strengthened our forces. Something like that."

At those words, Eleris quietly opened her mouth.

"To create an advanced undead like the Death Knights, an alchemist's power isn't necessary, scribe. A necromancer alone would suffice. But if alchemy was indeed used… it means that something other than simple undead creation is taking place."

At her words, Gallarush grumbled with his arms crossed.

"However, it's too much to assume that just because an alchemist is involved, their work is directly related to alchemy. They could be conducting entirely separate research."

Only Christina's involvement as an alchemist had been confirmed.

"And, being an alchemist doesn't necessarily mean that she can only handle alchemy."

Anna had helped with Moonshine production, but Moonshine was not a product of dark magic.

Similarly, Christina might be assisting with research in dark magic, not alchemy. There was a clear possibility.

Were these two magic disciplines truly collaborating?

Or were they entirely separate research projects?

Or was it solely the work of dark magic?

"We must consider the worst-case scenario."

The one who added this remark was Luvien.

"Alchemy and dark magic are connected, and bones are being used. What could they possibly be doing with that? Shouldn't we think about that?"

"Indeed."

Whether or not such an event actually occurred, they needed to consider the worst possible situation.

It was their responsibility to predict whether this would threaten Edina.

Being optimistic about the situation held no meaning.

"Do the lords of Thursday and Saturday, who are well-versed in alchemy, have any ideas?"

"Thursday's alchemy is mainly focused on plants; it's mostly related to plant-based alchemy. It's more pure, you could say. Alchemy close to dark magic or forbidden arts is not our domain… So, to be honest, I have no idea."

In response to Harriet's question, Luvien shook her head.

Thursday.

Their alchemy, as mentioned, was a remarkably pure branch of the art.

It wouldn't be an exaggeration to say that the knowledge of plant-based alchemy occupies a significant portion of Lazak's current food supply.

There is little, if any, knowledge related to the undead and forbidden arts. After all, alchemy is a vast field of study within the magic disciplines.

Luvien seemed to have no ideas, and Harriet stared at Antirianus with a tense expression.

"Lord of Saturday, you…"

"Ah, I see you're expecting quite a lot from me."

"…It might be rude to say, but I think it's strange that you wouldn't know about this area, Lord of Saturday."

-Nod

At Harriet's words, everyone unanimously nodded in agreement.

Alchemy related to dark magic.

If there was anything wicked, malicious, or cruel, it wouldn't make sense if that perverted, twisted vampire, who couldn't help meddling, didn't know about it.

CHAPTER 569

"Heh… I wonder what everyone thinks of me…"

Looking at Antirianus, who was clearly showing signs of discontent, Lucinil frowned.

"Antirianus, I think I'm more nervous because I believe you know something worse than the truth."

"Ah… That's… true?!"

Hearing Lucinil's words, Harriet could not help but gain new insights.

That mad old man probably knows something more cruel and terrible than what the Empire is currently doing, which makes him even scarier.

In fact, Eleris had been pale, almost turning blue before even hearing anything.

Harriet wondered if it would be better not to hear what Antirianus had to say.

Wouldn't it be better not to know what bizarre and horrifying possibilities are being presented from the abyss?

"Perhaps, it would be best if the Lord of Saturday doesn't say anything…"

Harriet grew more fearful, thinking that a story worse than reality would unfold.

"Alchemy… The previous Lord of Saturday did try to create the Philosopher's Stone."

Upon hearing that, the expressions of the other four Lords changed.

Antirianus's predecessor, the previous Lord of Saturday, had undoubtedly pursued it.

"The Philosopher's Stone?"

At Harriet's question, Antirianus nodded.

"I thought it was a legend similar to dragons."

A legend on par with dragons.

In other words, it meant a futile story.

"In fact, that's true. The previous Lord failed to create the Philosopher's Stone."

It was difficult to guess the truth about the previous Lord of Saturday from Antirianus's ambiguous expression.

However, the important conversation now was not about the Philosopher's Stone.

"Of course, my research was slightly different from the previous Lord's."

"What kind of research was it?"

"For example, studying convergent evolution of species…"

"…Convergent evolution?"

"Yes, scribe."

Harriet felt like she wanted to plug her ears.

"There are quite a few cases where different species acquire similar functions, right? For example, like how demons and humans have discovered their own ways of handling mana, albeit differently."

"Ah, yes…"

"That was my research. What would humans become if they continued to evolve like this? What would demons become if they continued to evolve like this? As they evolve, they gradually acquire similar functions and might become completely identical beings, despite having different roots. I've researched under such assumptions."

"…So, what did you do?"

"I failed."

Everyone, including Harriet and the other Lords, was dumbfounded by the extremely disappointing conclusion.

However, the following statement was enough to shock everyone.

"To begin with, both humans and demons needed their growth rates to be much faster, allowing for frequent generational changes. But failing to modify both species like that, I couldn't see the end, could I?"

If it had been someone else, they might not have understood what Antirianus was talking about, but everyone present was a mage.

They knew the meaning of Antirianus's words.

Lucinil stared at Antirianus with a trembling expression.

“…So, you tried to improve the species itself, then?"

"Yes, that's right."

The plan was to accelerate the generation replacement of humans and demons to observe the evolution of their species, but it failed.

In short, it involved biological experimentation. It goes without saying that living humans and demons were used for this.

Harriet's face turned pale.

The story Antirianus told was a dreadful one.

All the other lords present seemed to react with an indifferent "Oh, I see," upon hearing the tale.

Even Eleris seemed slightly taken aback, though not outwardly shocked.

Everyone at the gathering was an ancient being and a mage, so they considered such events to be relatively normal.

This applied to both Antirianus and the other Vampire Lords.

Harriet shuddered to think what her father, who rejected impure and blasphemous powers, would say if he knew she was in the company of such beings.

With a trembling expression, Harriet asked,

"So… why did you conduct such experiments in the first place? Did you want to become such a being yourself… or something like that?"

"I was curious, with plenty of time and nothing to do. Is there any other reason?"

"Ah."

"So, I tried it, and if I could modify the species with my own hands, it would be unnatural in the first place, and it would be pointless to find an endpoint in such a way. Besides, evolution doesn't always flow in the direction of progress, so it was a meaningless experiment from the start."

In the end, Vampire Lords were immortal mages.

Living for so long made them curious about unnecessary things, leading them to conduct strange experiments without any significant reason.

Antirianus went on to list several other alchemical experiments he had conducted.

He had attempted to create winged humans by combining harpies and humans or artificially imprint magic circuits on animals to make beasts capable of using magic.

"I also tried an experiment to transplant the brain of one creature into another."

“…You've done every weird thing possible, haven't you?"

"Well, it failed with different species, but it succeeded with the same species."

“…Really? It succeeded?"

There were shocking success stories, like the time they transplanted the brains of two different humans and they were still able to move.

"Of course, even with success, they rarely survived more than a day."

There were failed experiments, half-successful ones, and quite a few successful ones.

In conclusion, Antirianus was a deranged mage.

A mage who had dipped his toes into bizarre and terrifying deeds.

That was Antirianus.

And none of this was particularly surprising to anyone. Everyone nodded as if to say, "It's just like Antirianus," and Harriet was no exception.

It was only natural for a person like him to do such things.

He had committed countless heinous acts that would warrant being burned at the stake.

Antirianus's statement that alchemy and dark magic were inseparable was true.

The experiments themselves were hardly different from dark magic, and it was a fact that he almost always employed dark magical means to achieve success.

"Of course, I've also tried experiments to create beings like Lord of Wednesday."

Antirianus looked at Lucinil with a cold smile and said,

“…A plague."

"You don't seem surprised."

"I thought you'd do something like this. No, it would be strange if you didn't."

"I am grateful that you recognize my fondness for the Lord of Wednesday…”

"Enough."

Lucinil stuck out her tongue, as if she hadn't expected him not to do it.

Harriet knew as well.

Lucinil was originally one of the products of the Homunculus experiment, a

forbidden art among alchemy.

When Harriet first found out that Lucinil was a Homunculus, she was shocked.

Not only that, but she was also a vampire.

The fact that one could be both a Homunculus and a vampire was already a miracle in itself.

"Ultimately, what I'm trying to say is that alchemy being a magic that deals with potions and elixirs is a misconception and prejudice from the start."

"…"

"The alchemy practiced by alchemists in the world is nothing but coarse magic."

Hearing Antirianus's explanation, Harriet couldn't help but understand what he meant.

Elixirs and potions.

Alchemy was never that kind of magic to begin with.

Only a level of alchemy that could be accepted by society was allowed, so the original meaning of alchemy was greatly diminished and faded.

"Originally, alchemy primarily dealt with forbidden arts concerning life."

Even the word "alchemy" itself overly restricts the essence of the magic.

Life experiments.

In other words, Chimeras.

And Homunculus.

That was closer to the essence of alchemy.

So, it was only natural for an alchemist to be involved in the magic of dealing with the dead, according to Antirianus.

Alchemy was a magic that dealt with life.

"You approach alchemy in that way, so you say it's normal. But Antirianus's words are true."

Lucinil nodded in agreement.

"Alchemy is a magic discipline that is even closer to black magic than black magic itself."

Alchemy is closer to forbidden arts in essence. Dealing with potions and elixirs is extremely limited and specific in the system of alchemy, and it has overly narrowed alchemy down.

"So, you're saying that it's highly likely that the forbidden arts, including Chimeras and Homunculi, are involved in what the Empire is doing now?"

"It would inevitably be so."

Strictly speaking, the undead also belong to the category of things that move and live.

So, it was highly likely that the field of alchemy was being applied.

"So, do you know or not what the Empire is doing now?"

At Lucinil's question, Antirianus laughed and shrugged his shoulders.

"How could I know when I haven't seen it with my own eyes? I just meant to tell you that it's not strange for an alchemist to be involved."

The question of why an alchemist is involved itself was already wrong.

There was nothing strange about being involved.

However, they're back to square one. Although it's not strange for them to be involved, they still don't know what they're doing.

"But it seems certain that the Empire is up to something."

"Lord… That's obvious, isn't it?"

To begin with, there was no one in the room who didn't know that the Empire was up to something.

Thus, despite her fear of Antirianus, Harriet's frustration with his words almost reached its breaking point, as she had returned to square one.

"Scribe, did you not hear what I said?"

"Lord of Saturday… he's done… a great number of terrifying things…"

Although she had imagined as much, hearing the actual stories made her stomach churn and her spine shiver, as there were countless instances of horrifying experiments.

"Scribe, my point is not that I've conducted so many experiments. What I wanted to convey was that I've 'failed' in so many of them."

"Ah…"

Antirianus did not recount these events to flaunt his cruelty and madness anew.

Although they were all beings of some capability and not to be taken lightly, the other Vampire Lords merely reacted with a knowing nod.

In fact, Harriet was the only one in the room who was genuinely shocked by Antirianus's stories of his experiments.

"Chimera and homunculus experiments generally fail. This is because life is such a precise and intricate system that it's difficult to approach even with magic."

Antirianus had not been recounting his tales to show off, but rather to share his many stories of failure in detail.

"Right. As Antirianus mentioned, I've researched and experimented with creating homunculi similar to myself for much longer than that fellow. Of course, all of them ended in failure."

Lucinil nodded in agreement.

Harriet couldn't help but wonder who had created Lucinil and what had become of them, but that was not the important topic at hand.

Chimera and homunculus.

These were not only taboo, but also an extremely difficult branch of magic, because they involve life.

Harriet pondered silently.

Antirianus had lived for a very long time, and Lucinil even longer.

Both of them had conducted chimera and homunculus research on various subjects, and while there might have been some successes, the majority had failed.

They were now at war.

There was no reason to invest resources and manpower into something uncertain.

The Titan Project had been a gamble, but it had a solid foundation.

The same would likely be true for this endeavor.

"So, they're not conducting research or experiments, but rather a specific 'operation'…Is that what you're saying?"

"Indeed."

There was a definite 'method' to be employed, and the Empire was undertaking the task.

It was an effort that could lead to a significant increase in their military power.

But this had already been stated repetitively.

Of course, the project was ongoing because there was a viable method in place.

"However, it's strange. The Empire, and human lands alike, are very strict about the

taboo related to dark magic."

"Yes… that's true."

Taboos weren't just in place for no reason.

While individual mages might not be entirely exempt, those who studied forbidden magic were naturally sentenced to the most severe penalties.

"Moreover, the Empire has not conducted its own research into taboos. It was a nation with a commendable perception of magic, applying that understanding even to itself."

It was an ironic situation for someone who had dabbled in forbidden research and experiments to discuss propriety, but the Empire was not a nation that secretly meddled in the taboo.

"A matter involving a taboo, knowledge of it."

Antirianus laughed chillingly.

The Empire, which had never delved too deeply into dark magic and alchemy, was now involved in a magic operation requiring knowledge of a highly advanced taboo.

Naturally, they were engaging in it because they believed they could succeed.

"Isn't the source of that knowledge more important?"

While the research itself was important, the origin of the research was even more so.

Harriet stared blankly at Antirianus, her mouth agape.

Forbidden magic.

Two groups possessed vast knowledge about it.

One was Cantus Magna.

The other one.

"Don't tell me… The Empire has joined forces with the Black Order… Is that what you're saying?"

Antirianus laughed at Harriet's suspicion.

"It would be strange if that wasn't the case."

The suspicion related to the undead went beyond the truth of the suspicion itself and suggested a completely unexpected possibility.

CHAPTER 570

There was no way the Empire had extensive research materials on dark magic, which they had never explored before.

However, if a large-scale project was underway, they must have acquired that knowledge from somewhere.

The Black Order had extended their reach across the continent to deal with the Gate incident in their own way, suffering tremendous losses as a result.

With their last remaining strength, they poured most of their resources into killing the Demon King.

But even the swordsmen who had reached the Master Class and the Grand Magician, who was also the final leader of the Black Order, couldn't stand against the Demon King.

The remnants fled as soon as they realized there was no hope.

Since then, the Black Order had been unable to interfere in the affairs of the continent.

However, the Black Order's power might have vanished, but their knowledge hadn't.

There was a possibility that the remnants of the Black Order had joined forces with the Empire, providing them with their knowledge. The Empire, having no choice, would have accepted the knowledge about the forbidden arts.

Although they couldn't know exactly what the Empire was doing, suspicions about other possibilities arose.

In the end, this could also be considered a significant harvest.

"The Black Order tried to kill His Majesty. Regardless of the Empire's intentions, if this is true, it can't be good news for us," Eleris said.

Harriet nodded in agreement.

The Empire's willingness to use any means necessary to win the war was not only shared by them but also by Reinhardt.

If the knowledge of the Black Order could help end the war, Reinhardt wouldn't hesitate to use it.

Luvien, who had been silent, crossed her arms and looked out the window.

"It's clear that the Empire is not just researching but working towards a specific goal with tangible results, and it's highly likely that the knowledge of the Black Order serves as their foundation."

"The Black Order is an ancient order of magic practitioners. Their knowledge of the forbidden arts and research materials must be more extensive than any magic group in this world. Following the now-vanished Akasha, there's no other group with such vast resources as the Black Order."

"What could the Empire possibly want to accomplish by absorbing such knowledge…?"

"Before that, there's something we need to confirm."

Luvien looked at Harriet.

"You said that the bodies in the royal mausoleum and the Hall of Heroes were replaced and disappeared?"

"Yes, my lord."

Harriet nodded.

"Did 'all' the bodies in the Hall of Heroes disappear?"

At that question, Harriet shook her head.

"I can't be certain. We didn't open all the tombs. But all the tombs we checked were empty."

"Hmm, I see."

As Luvien seemed to be deep in thought, Harriet tilted her head.

"Lord, is that important?"

"Yes, it is."

"Why?"

Luvien shrugged.

"Although I don't know specifically who's buried in the Hall of Heroes, it's not just heroes who were physically strong."

Not only were there individuals who had reached the Master Class, but also those who had made outstanding achievements or left a mark on human history.

"Let me be more specific."

Luvien asked.

"Was the tomb of Mullerun, the mage from the hero’s companions, empty as well?"

Harriet's eyes widened at those words.

The Hall of Heroes.

Charlotte had mentioned that the body of Ragan Artorius wasn't there to begin with.

That would mean that the other tombs contained the remains.

Harriet was certain that she had opened all the tombs of the five warriors that day.

"Yes, definitely… they were all empty."

Olivia Lanze had said.

When creating a Death Knight, the basic conditions are essential.

Although it was a rather malicious example, Olivia had clearly said that a Death Knight could not be made using Harriet's corpse.

However, the Empire was not doing the same work as Olivia; it was clear that they were doing something entirely different.

"That suggests a rather… frightening possibility."

The royal family must have had a plan and anticipated that they could retrieve the remains because of that.

"Are you saying that a dead body could use magic as well?"

"Is that… possible?"

Harriet asked, her face turning pale.

"It's not strange for the undead to use magic in the first place."

Antirianus pointed to himself as he looked around.

The Vampire Lords present were undead.

"Although I have never heard of it and didn't think it was possible, couldn't they create Liches?"

If they could resurrect dead warriors as Death Knights.

Then, resurrecting dead mages as Liches wouldn't be impossible either.

It may be a magic that has never existed in the world, but that doesn't mean it can never exist.

"If the Empire can resurrect numerous heroes and mages from human history and deploy them in the war, the war won't be the problem."

Lucinil spoke with a stern expression.

"The Empire will possess greater military power than ever."

If this assumption is true.

Although humanity has weakened.

At the moment the project is completed, the Empire will be stronger than ever.

Nothing was revealed in the Council of Elders' meeting, and the suspicions only grew.

So far, they had not paid attention to the identity of the missing heroes' remains.

There is circumstantial evidence that the Empire can create not only Death Knights but also Liches.

Only one of the missing mage's remains, Mullerun, has been identified so far.

That means there is a possibility that the remains of great Archmages, who are in various places such as the Hall of Wisdom, were also retrieved.

If they all come back to life as Liches, and if they can use magic at the same level as when they were alive?

The Empire would possess the most powerful army in history.

Eleris spoke quietly.

"If the war ends and the Empire disbands that army, then I don't know… but if they don't…"

"We cannot rule out the possibility that the army might target us."

At Eleris's fearful prediction, Harriet felt goosebumps all over her body.

That couldn't be.

There's no reason for that.

Where is the reason for them to give up such a powerful force?

Although they are cooperating with each other now, they both know that this cooperation cannot last forever.

Gallarush spoke.

"Regardless of what the Empire is doing, we may need to destroy it before it's completed."

Ending the war is a common goal.

However, everyone knows that peace will not come to the world the moment the goal is achieved.

Whatever the Empire is preparing, it may help end the war, but the problem is what comes next.

In the end, it's a foolish act.

After all of this ends, fearing what might transpire, we must contemplate destroying the very means that might allow us to conclude it all.

If left alone, the war might end more easily.

However, the means that easily resolved the war might destroy us afterward.

So, should we foolishly interfere with it?

The Great Demon War was caused by humanity's fear of demons.

The Gate Incident, too, was due to mutual fear and hatred.

And now, once more, everyone is put to the test.

Should we watch as our opponent wields immense power?

Or should we thwart their plans?

If trust had been placed in one another, none of this would have happened.

But just as the Empire couldn't trust Darkland,

Darkland, too, couldn't trust the Empire.

One should rest when it's time to rest, I thought.

I thought so, watching Ellen and Heinrich, but it turns out I, too, didn't know how to rest.

Considering Heinrich announced he'd take a lap of patrol around the Imperial Capital as soon as he returned, it seemed like he didn't come to rest in the first place.

Looking at it now, the most dangerous place might not be the Alliance Army's garrison with troops on constant standby, but the Imperial Capital. The security of this place and the surrounding areas was undoubtedly the worst.

In that case, it might be better to secure the safety of nearby areas during the winter.

Ellen and Heinrich seemed to be planning to take a lap around the outer districts.

Ellen would cover half of the circuit from the northern end to the west.

Heinrich would cover the other half from the southern end to the east.

It was a simple agreement.

"Be careful of the ones immune to fire."

"I will."

At the entrance to the temple, Ellen and Heinrich exchanged short words before parting.

This wasn't an agreement with the guards, but rather a voluntary mission.

They weren't taking any legal action in the refugee residential area but instead would sweep away any dangerous monsters in the outer districts and return.

"Hmm…"

Ellen stared at me, who had followed her outside the temple.

To avoid recognition, Ellen wore her robe hooded.

After contemplating whether she could take me along, Ellen eventually embraced me.

"Let's go."

-Meow

Just as Heinrich could control fire, Ellen could also harness Lapelt's flames to eliminate monsters from a distance.

As if going for a walk, she carried me lightly in her arms and headed north along the Imperial Capital.

A few days had passed since Ludwig was assigned to the 17th Refugee Residential Area Guard Unit in the southwest of the Imperial Capital.

Ludwig couldn't be treated as a mere guardsman.

And he wasn't officially a guard now, either. He had even heard that he could quit whenever he wanted to.

It wasn't because he had lost an arm.

Beyond being a former Temple Royal Class, he was a superhuman who far surpassed ordinary guardsmen.

Furthermore, he was a veteran who had joined the Alliance Army and continued to dedicate himself to the security of the Imperial Capital even after being sent to the rear.

Therefore, Ludwig was highly valued for his efforts, despite his current state, rather than being treated as receiving a golden parachute.

Ludwig wanted to be treated as a simple guardsman, but everyone treated him with

respect regardless of his temporary rank. This included the captain of the 17th Guard Unit to which Ludwig belonged.

However, right now, Ludwig was facing the troubled expression of the captain of the guard at the 17th Division Headquarters, one of the few intact buildings in the refugee residential area.

"Are you talking about joining the subjugation squad?"

"Yes, sir."

"Hmm…"

At Ludwig's words, the captain couldn't hide his troubled expression.

Ludwig had been assigned only a few days ago and already wanted to take on a different mission.

A subjugation mission.

Patrolling the outskirts of the Imperial Capital and fighting monsters directly as a member of the guard.

Ludwig told the captain that he wanted to take on that mission.

Since the subjugation squad was not under the jurisdiction of the 17th Division but belonged to a completely different command structure, Ludwig was essentially requesting to be transferred to a different unit altogether.

"Your help is needed here as well, Ludwig. Don't you know that?"

"…Yes, I'm well aware."

"I thought you had understood that the work here isn't to be taken lightly."

"It's not that I'm ignoring the work here, it's just…"

Ludwig wasn't saying this simply because he wanted to fight monsters.

While all the Imperial Capital guards were short on manpower, it was true that the

guards in the refugee residential area were especially lacking, and Ludwig was indeed needed.

Ludwig wasn't disregarding the work on this side.

"The work here is… too difficult for me."

"…"

Crime.

When dealing with crimes involving humans, immediate judgment and action were frequently required.

It was practically lawless, and even the guards themselves were often attacked.

Over the past few days, Ludwig had witnessed several instances where the immediate action taken by the guards was summary execution, without any proper trial or procedure.

Because public order was extremely unstable, the autonomy given to the guards was ensured to an excessive degree.

In such situations, Ludwig found it difficult to take immediate action.

Was his judgment correct?

Ludwig couldn't be sure.

In a fight against monsters, such judgment wasn't necessary.

Monsters were evil.

So, they needed to be killed.

But, whether the refugees who committed crimes were truly in the wrong or not, and whether they should be forgiven because they had no choice, he couldn't tell.

His actions might lead to the death of an innocent person, or a wrongful judgment might land someone innocent in prison.

The work wasn't worthless.

It was just too difficult for him.

Ludwig knew his judgment wasn't the best.

He might make the wrong decision.

That was what weighed heavily on Ludwig.

Fighting monsters might be physically exhausting, but it didn't cause headaches like this.

"That's not possible."

"…"

"Don't you know that the higher-ups won't accept your request, Ludwig?"

This position had been arranged by the emperor himself.

He couldn't possibly be allowed to leave the safer position that had been created for him and go to a dangerous place instead.

Being placed there was not a form of golden parachute for Ludwig. But he wasn't entirely free from that position either.

So Ludwig couldn't leave this position.

If he continued to reject the emperor's goodwill, he could even be exiled to a remote chapel.

He might not even be able to do this job anymore.

"…Understood."

In the end, Ludwig had no choice but to stay in his current position and trust his uncertain judgment.

CHAPTER 571

Ludwig never enjoyed slaughter.

To be precise, he feared it.

Still, Ludwig fought because he believed it was something he had to do.

That's the kind of person Ludwig is.

If there's a clear and precise goal, he doesn't hesitate to run towards it, even if it's frightening.

But.

In situations where there are no clear and precise answers, Ludwig loses his way.

Until now, Ludwig had relied on the help of his friends for such problems.

Delphin Izzard.

Ranian Sesor.

Not to mention Scarlett and Louis Ancton, as well as the other classmates in Class B.

Someone else would make the decision for him, and Ludwig would follow that path.

But now, Ludwig was alone.

And he had to face problems with no clear answers.

There are no rules or theories in the vague notion of living a virtuous life.

That's why Ludwig couldn't tell which among those living in despair he needed to raise his hand against.

There had never been a reason to establish such a thing before.

Ludwig's sense of justice was solely about punishing blatant evil.

The mastermind of all these troubles, the Demon King.

The monsters that seek to destroy humanity.

In the presence of clear enemies, Ludwig's unbreakable will shone brightly.

But in places like this.

In the refugee zone filled with people fighting to survive in chaos, neither good nor evil, Ludwig couldn't tell what to choose.

Ludwig thought the battlefield was dreadful.

"Give me just one more piece! Just one more piece of bread!"

But this scene, where people were fighting over a single piece of bread, was truly horrifying.

Ludwig walked through the refugee zone filled with shanties, accompanied by a patrol of the security forces.

He had to become accustomed to the pervasive poverty, stench, and the smell of hunger that clung to every corner like grime.

More than half of the people who hid in the alleys between the shanties did so simply because they saw the uniform of the security forces.

If they had nothing to hide, they wouldn't need to hide at all.

Had they all committed some crime, or were they planning to commit one?

Ludwig clenched his teeth as he looked at the hidden adults and children in silence.

It couldn't be.

In the refugee camp, which was no different from a lawless zone, the security forces punished most crimes with extreme measures.

Even if they had done nothing wrong, they would avoid them for that reason.

Indeed, Ludwig saw a security force member slap a young boy in the face simply because he had bumped into him while chatting and patrolling with Ludwig.

When Ludwig saw the boy trembling on the ground with a bloody mouth, his face drained of color.

He didn't know what to say to the security force member who smiled sheepishly, as if hitting the boy was a gentle act because it happened in front of Ludwig.

When Ludwig realized that slapping someone was considered a light punishment, he had even less to say.

Witnessing such events was a series of painful experiences.

There were two security force members currently accompanying Ludwig.

"Hmm…"

The one in charge of the senior soldier role, Sontein, stopped in the street and stared at something.

"I think we should go over there."

One of the security force members pointed in a certain direction beyond the shanties.

"Is there something over there?"

"It smells like grilled meat."

"You're right. And there seems to be smoke too. But why…"

Seeing the bewildered Ludwig, the guardsman shrugged.

"Why would there be meat here?"

"…"

Ludwig wasn't so clueless as to not understand the meaning behind those words.

A short while later.

"Ugh! Ugh!"

The emaciated group, with only bones remaining, stared at the ground with their sunken eyes. The guardsmen clicked their tongues, watching Ludwig retching.

"It's a common occurrence."

The other guardsmen were neither surprised nor shocked.

They eat because they're hungry.

It's a natural thing.

In desperate situations, cannibalism sometimes becomes the only choice.

The calm attitude of the guardsmen, unfazed by the situation.

And the eyes that swallowed saliva from afar, watching the contents the guardsman had spilled.

Ludwig gritted his teeth as he saw those gazes.

This was beyond difficult.

It was painful.

Cannibalism was punishable by death.

No matter how starving they were, it could not be forgiven.

If punishment for that act were not carried out on the grounds that it was an unavoidable choice, people would think not to avoid it in the future, but to avoid

getting caught.

In that case, cannibalism would become an accepted culture in refugee settlements.

It's not that they're killed because the crime is heinous and unforgivable evil.

Some crimes could ruin the entire refugee settlement.

Ludwig knew that help was needed in the refugee settlements.

He thought there must be something he could do.

He hoped that even through small acts, he could find his purpose in life.

"…"

But where was the smallness in this?

Some people might deem these acts easier than risking their lives on the battlefield.

Ludwig found the battlefield easier.

It was more comfortable.

In this horrifying place, where everyone became each other's enemy due to the single enemy called hunger, it was the most challenging job for Ludwig.

He wanted to run away.

For the first time in his life, Ludwig harbored such thoughts.

Ludwig saw and felt how absurd it was for the military not to starve in the allied forces' base.

He couldn't help but understand why the allied forces' regular soldiers continued to be replenished.

Because they wouldn't starve to death before being trampled by monsters.

The soldiers at the Serandia allied forces base would undoubtedly live comfortably during the winter.

He couldn't help but feel how important that 'eating' was in the matter of sustenance.

There was only one problem.

Starvation.

But the numerous derivative problems caused by that issue didn't end with cannibalism.

“…What is this?"

"I don't know."

Looking at the object, something made of bone fragments haphazardly connected, which Sontain had found while searching a shack, Ludwig felt an indescribable disgust.

He couldn't even tell what bones they were.

A guardsman who sensed something strange from the murmurs of many people in a corner of the shack had entered and brought out the object.

Seven people in the small shack were praying to this bone fragment idol.

Naturally, it didn't resemble the holy symbols of any known gods.

Heresy was rampant.

It was impossible to treat the Hero Religion, which believed in Ellen Artorius, as heretical.

However, not only the Hero Religion but also strange superstitions of unknown origins were occurring throughout the refugee settlements.

"Are they worshipers of the demon god?"

One of the guards asked as he looked down at the trembling heretics who knelt before him.

"Oh, no, we believe in our savior, Estar, who will soon manifest before us…"

They were heretics who believed in an unknown deity.

"Salvation is near…"

Ludwig seemed to lose all his strength.

"What shall we do with them?"

"There's no need to kill them all."

Did this mean that they would spare some of them?

-Thunk!

"Kuh… Kukkkk…"

It turned out they meant to kill just one.

"Do not believe in heresy."

The guard left those words behind and turned away.

It wasn't a law that sentenced them to death.

Just one guard.

People's lives hung in the balance, dependent on the guard's judgment.

“Damned bastards…”

“Divine retribution will come.”

As Ludwig and his comrades turned their backs, curses rained down upon them. The other guards didn't even react, as if they were used to it, and left their posts.

“It's better not to think of them as human beings.”

The senior guard who had been judging whether to kill or spare the refugees, Sontain, who was equivalent to Ludwig's superior, said so.

"It's better to think of them as insects."

"But still, how can…”

So, did I fight and lose my arm to protect these insects?

Did the allied forces lose their lives and friends to protect these insects?

Is it acceptable for the guards here to easily trample and kill these precious beings they consider insects?

Are the allied forces dying for mere insects?

Do you have the right to make such a judgment?

Ludwig wanted to explode with anger, but he couldn't bring himself to say those words.

What else can be done?

Everyone knows that if their hunger were resolved, none of this would happen.

But isn't it because they can't solve the problem that all of this is happening?

The answer is simple.

But there is no path to that answer.

"If you don't think like that, you won't be able to do your job."

Sontain looked around.

He spoke quietly, looking at the hiding adults and children.

"We may think of them as insects, but they see us as monsters."

Monsters that kill insects.

That's all the guards were in this place.

"Don't approach them carelessly."

"…"

"There have been countless cases of people who got too close and ended up dead."

The guards are a collection of monsters.

The refugees have no reason to like the guards who treat them worse than dogs.

Countless guards have died, thinking themselves different from the others, showing compassion, only to be stabbed in return.

Just as the guards execute the refugees on the spot, the refugees kill the guards as well.

The guards treat the refugees harshly, and the refugees take revenge on the guards, leading the guards to take even more extreme actions.

This vicious cycle of hatred was the current situation in the refugee camp.

Ludwig nodded to Sontain's words, his expression heavy.

A well-crafted law is not necessarily maintained.

As long as there is power to uphold the law, it can be maintained.

It doesn't matter if the standards are vague.

It doesn't have to be fair.

Even if the law becomes so vague that it can no longer be called a law, it doesn't

matter.

No matter how fair and noble a law may be, without the power to enforce it, a powerful authority, it is not a subject of trust in the first place.

And so, the foundation of the law itself lies in power, not in the perfection of the law.

The refugee district blatantly displayed this reality.

The situation, which merely suppressed the refugees with violence, was bound to reach a breaking point someday.

If someday the anger and hatred of the refugees surpass the threshold that can be suppressed by force, the authorities will be overthrown.

The law, having lost its only supporting force, will become meaningless, and chaos will ensue.

Starvation.

Cannibalism.

Heresy.

Murders by the guards.

And.

Attacks on the guards.

-Whack!

“Die, you devil scum!”

Ludwig caught a fist-sized rock flying towards his face with his left hand and looked at the boy who disappeared into the alley, spewing words of hatred.

Startled by Ludwig's reflexes, Sontain quickly calmed down and stared at the alley.

"Shall we chase him?"

"It's alright. I was the one attacked after all."

-These days, even a moron can be a guard!

Hearing the echo of the boy yelling at him from the alley, Ludwig bitterly laughed.

Not only those who attacked directly.

Eyes peering from the corners of gambling dens and alleys.

He could feel the murderous intent and hatred mixed in those gazes.

No matter how arbitrarily the guards beat and killed someone, they didn't punish the gazes themselves.

It wasn't because they couldn't make those eyes pay for their sins.

It was because they couldn't kill all those who had such eyes, as it would require destroying the entire refugee district.

Ludwig shook his head while holding the rock that had flown at him.

If he got used to this job, he would have to kill refugees like the other guards.

After his probation period, Ludwig would have to participate in such private punishments.

Could he do that?

Was it even the right thing to do?

No matter how much Ludwig thought about it, he couldn't handle such a job.

Fighting wasn't allowed, and all he could do was maintain order by beating and suppressing the helpless under the pretext of keeping the peace, and sometimes meting out summary executions.

It might be better to return to the temple and stay quietly confined to the dormitory.

Or perhaps look for other things he could do elsewhere.

In the end, Ludwig couldn't help but reach such thoughts.

But leaving this place wouldn't make its tragedy disappear.

Turning away because it's hard to endure is not the right thing to do.

He couldn't know what was right, but Ludwig couldn't help but know that one thing.

Patrolling was, quite literally, walking around various places, detecting abnormalities in the streets, and taking action on the spot.

The patrol led by Sontain, who guided Ludwig, didn't only involve violent acts that killed refugees.

Retrieving abandoned corpses in alleys and identifying the deceased.

Mediating minor disputes to prevent them from escalating into violence.

Watching for thieves at locations where food was distributed.

Listening to the refugees about the street conditions and checking for overall situations or organized crime groups in the area.

There was even the task of safely returning a lost child crying on the street, to their parents.

Many refugees were afraid of and detested the guards, but not all of them.

'If only we did tasks like these, it would be fine…… '

Ludwig smiled as he watched a child, holding their mother's hand, wave wildly at him as they walked away.

Executing refugees was an extremely extreme situation, and it wasn't a frequent occurrence.

There were trivial matters and important, necessary tasks to be done.

Not every task was perilous.

Ludwig walked the streets with Sontain until their patrol was nearing its end.

"That area is off-limits. No need to patrol there."

“…There's a barrier?"

Ludwig saw a cordoning line within a certain alleyway.

It seemed an entire area had been closed off.

Within the cordoned-off area, Ludwig quietly observed gray smoke rising into the sky.

A fire was clearly burning.

"Is there a reason for the cordon?"

"There's an outbreak of infectious disease."

“…An infectious disease?"

"It's common. Epidemics break out fairly often."

"Isn't it dangerous? With people densely gathered like this, if an epidemic spreads…”

Even with the cordon in place, if the disease started spreading, it would create a massive problem.

Not just one or two people dying, but thousands would perish.

No, the epidemic itself wasn't even the issue.

"Shouldn't the priests… come?"

It was the priests' role to cure diseases.

Even if they lacked the capacity to heal one or two wounds, priests should be deployed for major issues like epidemics.

However, the priests did not come, only the area with the outbreak was closed off.

In response to Ludwig's words, Sontain quietly stared at the smoke rising from the sealed-off area.

It was undoubtedly the smoke from burning corpses.

"The power to heal diseases is the divine authority of the Goddes of Purity, Tu'an."

"Then the priests of Tu'an…"

"Many have died."

"Pardon?"

"You know what treatment they receive now…"

"Ah…"

"People hate not only the priests of Tu'an and Als, but all priests of the Five Great Religions, as the situation worsens."

The two gods who granted relics to the Demon King.

The persecution of their faiths had intensified since the Gate Incident.

Priests would come for epidemic treatment and refugee relief activities, but the hatred towards them had already gone too far.

Those in need of help hate those who would provide it.

Thus, even amidst raging epidemics, the moment the priests of Tu'an entered the massive refugee area, they had to worry about leaving alive.

Ludwig could only learn from Sontain's words that countless priests had indeed died.

That's why the priests couldn't easily enter the refugee area.

The epidemic was left unattended.

"Of course, they must have requested cooperation from the Holy Knights, as it would inevitably become a major issue if left unchecked. So, priests with concealed identities will handle the epidemic purification activities. The response may be delayed, but it's not neglected."

“…I see."

To save people, one must even hide whom they serve.

"Let's finish our patrol here. You can go straight home. I'll report to the Captain of the Guard."

"Ah… All right. Good work."

"Ludwig, sir."

Sontain quietly called out to Ludwig, who was about to leave.

“…You don't need to do things like this."

Implying that he was not suited for such tasks.

That someone who had returned from glorious deeds didn't need to engage in such miserable and repulsive tasks. Ludwig couldn't respond to those words.

Ellen and Heinrich decided to patrol the outskirts, dividing their efforts between the north and south.

In short, Ellen couldn't even step beyond the main street.

With a pale face, Ellen hurriedly returned to the temple and gently placed me, who she had been holding tightly, onto the bed.

"…”

-Meow

Although Ellen was wearing a hood to conceal her face, everyone had seen her

holding a cat.

Honestly, it wasn't entirely unexpected.

As they walked along, the children would ask, "Sis, can't I have that?"

"Can I have it?"

"I'm hungry."

Ellen's face turned pale blue as the children persistently followed her.

At least it was just the children.

When adult men and women began to approach with their mouths watering, Ellen hastily turned and walked away.

CHAPTER 572

Ellen had never imagined that her small and adorable cat could be considered as food by someone else.

She wasn't ignorant of the hunger issues in the refugee camp.

However, since the Gate incident, Ellen had been repeatedly deployed and returned from the battlefield through mass teleportation.

As a result, she had spent very little time in the Imperial Capital after the Gate incident.

Now, she was serving in the allied forces.

Judging by her expression, it was clear that today was her first time entering the refugee camp area.

Adults and children alike were starving, and she had seen for the first time the sight of corpses left behind not due to monster attacks, but because of starvation.

It wasn't that she was surprised because of it, but because seeing it with her own eyes was too overwhelming and shocking.

For a while, Ellen stood there, dazed, after seating me on the bed, seemingly lost in thought.

"I'll go alone."

After gently stroking my head, Ellen left the room.

Unlike Ellen, I had seen the situation in the refugee camp firsthand, but I could feel that the situation had worsened since then.

With the distribution of food to the camp decreasing to barely enough to feed the army, the hunger could only intensify.

I wondered if a contagious disease was spreading, as I occasionally saw people who seemed to be sick rather than starving.

At a time when the divine power of the Goddes of Purity, Tu'an, was desperately needed, the refugees harbored extreme hatred for both Tu'an and the Als' Church.

The priests probably couldn't carry out their duties properly.

The problem of food, and now winter.

Countless people would starve to death, freeze to death, or die from illness.

The dense population of the Imperial Capital exceeded 100 million.

During the winter, the number of people who would die from starvation or freezing in the Imperial Capital would easily surpass ten million.

It was heartbreaking and desperate.

But it was a problem that I couldn't solve.

The population of the Imperial Capital alone was ten times that of the entire Edina Archipelago.

Edina had better food conditions than the Imperial Capital, but it wasn't abundant either.

Even if there was surplus food, it was the same.

There was no way to transport the food needed to save tens of millions of refugees from Edina to the Imperial Capital.

I couldn't solve the hunger problem here.

What I could do, or at least try, was to reach the end of the Gate incident.

I would have to think about what came next at that time.

Heinrich and Ellen, both on patrol, but the first to return to the dormitory was Heinrich.

-Meow

"Hmm?"

He tilted his head upon seeing the little one wandering alone without Ellen.

“…Did she plan to take you with her?"

Heinrich didn't seem injured. There wouldn't be many monsters near the Imperial Capital, and even if there were, they wouldn't pose a threat to Heinrich.

That's how it was.

If a single orc appeared on the outskirts of the Imperial Capital and started causing havoc, dozens of refugees would easily die, but Heinrich could take care of that orc with a simple gesture.

"Haah…”

Heinrich sighed while looking out the window.

He would have had to enter the refugee area to patrol the outskirts, and he must have seen the same things Ellen saw today.

It was no wonder his expression was like that.

About two hours after Heinrich returned.

Just as the evening was about to begin, Ellen finally returned to the dormitory.

Of course, her safe return was expected, but I couldn't help feeling relieved.

The evening banquet hall.

Although there were other students present, the four second-year students were Ellen, Heinrich, the returning Ludwig, and Dettomorian.

The three researchers rarely left their laboratories.

Dettomorian's complexion was naturally poor.

Ellen's complexion was poor due to the events of the day.

Heinrich's complexion was also poor, having witnessed a similar scene as Ellen.

Ludwig served in the guard, so naturally, his expression was not good, having witnessed even worse scenes or possibly having done something dreadful.

Thus, the dinner began with all four of them looking rather unwell.

My stomach churned.

Ellen hesitated as she tried to scoop some scrambled eggs onto my designated plate.

"…"

A visible wave of guilt swept across her face.

As if considering how extravagant it was to raise animals in a time of such famine.

I assumed Ellen couldn't help but have such thoughts.

Ellen looked down at me with a tearful expression.

In the end, Ellen couldn't bear to starve me, and carefully stroked my head after serving me the scrambled eggs.

Her hand seemed to say it wasn't my fault.

Ellen didn't eat as much as when she had first returned.

Feeling guilty about providing food led to feeling guilty about eating as well.

She probably knew that eating well and resting were right for people.

It's just hard to accept.

"How was the patrol? I couldn't cover the entire area because it's too wide."

It was Heinrich's question.

"It wasn't a problem, maybe because I didn't go too far. How about you?"

"Same here. I felt a bit empty for not being able to do anything, but I guess it's rather fortunate."

"Yeah."

The two had been on the move to check the situation on the outskirts of the wasteland.

If the two of them had returned after slaying a bunch of monsters, there would be no reason to rejoice. That would mean the outskirts were teeming with danger.

Therefore, it was better to have no results.

"It seems we're not the only ones who thought of this."

"…?"

Ellen cocked her head at Heinrich's words.

"It looks like the empire wants to ensure the safety of the wasteland during the winter, given the favorable situation at the coalition army's base. They seem to be operating large-scale extermination squads."

"…….That's fortunate."

Indeed.

The empire would undoubtedly have the same thoughts as these two.

While they couldn't save people from starvation, they could at least secure the nearby wasteland areas to eliminate the threat of monsters.

Ellen and Heinrich seemed to be considering volunteering for extermination squad missions, patrolling the outskirts of the wasteland and hunting down monsters.

Of course, Ellen shook her head after pondering, saying it didn't seem possible.

Bertus wanted Ellen to rest during the winter, and volunteering for an extermination squad would obviously not be permitted.

Heinrich also couldn't participate in the extermination squad for similar reasons, so both decided to move separately.

More help couldn't hurt.

If there were dangerous monsters roaming around, they could eliminate them, and if not, it would mean the wasteland was safe, which couldn't be a bad thing.

Both seemed intent on venturing further out tomorrow.

Why couldn't they just rest a bit?

Heinrich clicked his tongue briefly.

"The problem is the food supply."

Famine, not monsters, was now the imminent threat to the refugees.

While the appearance of a monster in a refugee camp would quickly kill hundreds of people, starvation would slowly kill millions.

Everyone knew what the real enemy was.

However, what cannot be defeated cannot be killed.

A monster could be killed, but there was no way to kill hunger.

"…"

In the silence, Ludwig struggled to eat with his left hand.

As the allied forces took a break, King Constantine von Schwarz of Kernstadt went out to inspect the situation.

However, what was important to the king was not the inspection but the whereabouts of his two missing princes.

Louise did not think lies would work on the king.

Even her close aides were suspicious about the princes' disappearance.

And King Constantine von Schwarz of Kernstadt had already received a report long ago.

He would have thought about it in his own way and tried to infer the truth.

In a situation where only Louise and Heinrich from the Schwarz family had survived, the king could well predict what the king would suspect.

Louise didn't make excuses. They wouldn't work.

She didn't say it couldn't be helped. It was an unjustifiable act.

So she said it directly.

"I killed them."

She told the king, who was trying to dig out the truth about the disappearance of the two princes, that she had killed them with her own hands.

And she said nothing else.

Louise was never talkative in the first place.

There was no reprimand, criticism, astonishment, or fear from the king.

King Constantine von Schwarz stared at his eldest daughter's face for a long time and uttered only one word.

"Is there anything else to say?"

An apology.

An excuse.

Tears.

Sorrow.

Guilt.

A plea or rage-filled rant for all these things.

To her father's question, Louise nodded her head.

"Yes, there's nothing more."

The daughter's reticence was similar to her father's.

"All right, I understand."

Just because the daughter didn't speak much didn't mean she didn't think, and just because the father didn't speak much didn't mean he didn't think either.

Louise and King Constantine von Schwarz both had many thoughts in their silence.

They were a father and daughter who only exchanged necessary conversations, like Louise and Heinrich now.

"Where is Heinrich?"

“…I sent him to the temple for a while."

The king would have understood what that meant.

Knowing that unnecessary trouble might arise, Louise had sent her son away for his safety.

King Constantine von Schwarz said nothing about his eldest daughter's actions, which had killed his two sons.

His daughter offered no excuses.

Only they could know what the other was thinking.

There were relationships that understood each other without conversation, and there were relationships that could not understand each other without conversation.

"The princes died because of Heinrich."

The two of them had the first kind of relationship.

Both had sons.

Both had mothers.

For Heinrich von Schwarz, four other princes had to die.

At those harsh words, Louise calmly said:

"If they hadn't all laid a hand on my son, they wouldn't have died."

A sharp response came back to the sharp words.

The two princes who tormented young Heinrich burned to death at the hands of Heinrich, who had awakened his supernatural powers.

The two brothers who tried to assassinate Heinrich died at the hands of Louise.

They should have left Heinrich alone.

As sharp words went back and forth, harsh words might follow, and eventually, something irreversible might be said.

But Louise had made up her mind.

No matter what she heard, she had decided to protect her son.

That's why Louise looked at the silent king.

"I thought you would know sooner."

“…Yes?"

Louise couldn't help but be taken aback by Constantine von Schwarz's words.

"I thought it would happen sooner."

"…"

"I thought you'd intervene with your siblings a bit earlier."

Louise had never considered that her father would think that way.

Constantine von Schwarz had always believed that it was bound to happen someday.

Children do not understand their parents.

Parents do not understand their children either.

But it is more common for parents to know their children slightly better than the other way around.

That's why Constantine von Schwarz considered it inevitable that this had to happen.

He couldn't accept it as natural, but he couldn't help but think it was unavoidable.

"You were either less wise than I thought, or you trusted your siblings more."

Even without Louise explaining, Constantine von Schwarz was already predicting what had happened within the alliance that led to this situation.

The ambitions of his children.

Jealousy and envy.

And their foolishness.

And Louise's guilt and love for her son.

It was bound to happen eventually because of all that.

"Did you love your siblings?"

"…"

Louise couldn't answer.

She couldn't say she loved them, nor could she say she didn't.

As she shed tears, mixed with unutterable sorrow, self-loathing, and guilt, without even making a sound.

Seeing her daughter, whose tears flowed down her cheeks but couldn't be wiped away.

Her daughter, who couldn't help but let the tears she had held back in front of her son flow in front of her father, clenching her teeth.

"Well… if that's the case… that's enough."

The father couldn't forgive his daughter for killing her siblings.

But he had no choice but to accept it as inevitable.

Regardless of the real reason, Louise assisted the King with the inspection of the Kernstadt Army, which was the original purpose.

They discussed the army's status, strength, and supply situation.

And after the report was over, Constantine von Schwarz said the same thing to Louise as she had said to Heinrich.

"Rest."

"…Pardon?"

"I'll take command of the army during the winter."

Just as the mother had ordered rest for her son, considering his long fatigue, the father ordered rest for his daughter, considering her long fatigue.

"I'll get permission from the Emperor. Since you wanted to go there so badly, spend the winter with Heinrich at the Temple."

An unexpected respite.

And the opportunity to spend time with her son in a place she had only dreamt of visiting.

She would now be able to visit the place where her son had grown up and lived, a place she hadn't even been allowed to observe from afar.

Upon hearing the news of the princes' disappearance, the king had come to terms with what he must endure and understand.

In the end, the throne is a cruel place.

Knowing that his daughter might do such a thing, he had no choice but to stand by, as she was to become the queen.

What mattered was the heir to the throne.

Now that the event he had anticipated but didn't know if it would occur had become reality, he must have thought that they should at least try to fix what was left.

There might be no reason for the remaining people to continue suffering, he might have thought.

The king's actions were not understanding, but resignation.

And knowing that, Louise couldn't help but feel even greater guilt.

CHAPTER 573

Ludwig headed towards the 17th District Guard again the next day.

While Heinrich and Ellen had the freedom to patrol the outskirts of the Imperial Capital on their own, Ludwig could not do such a thing, nor would it be permitted.

He might feel a sense of deprivation, but he was not oblivious to the difference in their absolute abilities.

He could not dare to overstep the tasks Heinrich and Ellen could do.

So Ludwig headed towards the guard.

It was a difficult and painful job, but even in that line of work, he could find small tasks he was capable of doing.

Even such little tasks as returning a lost child to their parents' hands were certainly not meaningless.

Hoping for such tasks, Ludwig went to the guard.

"Ludwig, sir, we have an important mission for you."

“…An important mission?"

"A task suited for you, Ludwig."

A task suited for him.

Both the archer Sontein and the captain of the guard respected Ludwig.

However, they were also aware that Ludwig could not handle witnessing the cruel acts of the guards in the refugee camp.

A task suited for Ludwig.

"Your task is to escort."

With a baffled look on Ludwig's face, the captain of the guard spoke softly.

"An escort…?"

"Aren't you aware of the epidemic?"

"Yes… I saw it yesterday."

"For the purification process, a priest has been dispatched."

An epidemic.

And purification.

Ludwig's eyes widened.

"Please escort the dispatched priest."

A task to eradicate the epidemic.

A task absolutely necessary to save people.

“…Thank you for your consideration."

They assigned him this task because they knew what Ludwig found difficult and what he wanted.

To purify an epidemic, a priest from the Tu’an Order is needed.

However, due to the Demon King, the Tu'an Order and the Als Order faced persecution.

In such circumstances, it was impossible for priests of the Tu'an Order to move openly, even if they had come to treat the epidemic.

Not only the followers of Tu'an faced persecution, but the priests also suffered worse

fates.

But they couldn't just ignore the epidemic. If it spread from the refugee district to the Imperial Capital, the situation might become unsolvable even with divine power.

That's why the priests of Tu'an risked their lives to purify the epidemic in the refugee district.

They had to move secretly, of course, so they couldn't wear their priest robes.

They also couldn't receive a large escort. They needed to move discreetly to avoid drawing attention.

Even though their purpose was not to cause harm, but to save people.

"Priesstes, this is Ludwig, who will be escorting you today."

Ludwig bowed his head as he looked at the priestess wearing a gray, weathered robe.

"Nice to meet you, my name is Rowan."

"Hello."

The priestess, who appeared to be about Ludwig's age, smiled at him.

"I know this may not be much, but I will do my best."

Ludwig added this, thinking that Rowan might be unhappy with the only escort from the 17th Guard being one-armed.

"Thank you, I'll be relying on you."

However, the priestess didn't seem to mind at all, as she gently smiled and nodded her head.

Ludwig and Rowan left the 17th District Guard headquarters together.

The task of purifying the epidemic. Ludwig felt a sense of clarity in his mind for the

first time in a while.

It was a simple task that didn't require deciding what was right.

They weren't wearing the uniforms of the guards to move discreetly, and Rowan was also wearing a hooded robe, her face concealed.

It was a situation where neither her identity as a priestess nor him as a guard was apparent.

It was merely a matter of purifying a plague-stricken area.

However, if an unforeseen situation arose, they might have to resort to force. Rowan glanced at Ludwig walking beside her and tilted her head.

"You're not an official guard, are you?"

"What? Oh… How did you know?"

"Because the captain of the guards mentioned it…"

It wasn't a particularly impressive deduction.

"Ah… Actually, I haven't been back from the allied forces' garrison for long. So…"

"You're a war veteran."

"Yes… I ended up in the rear due to an injury, but…"

"You're an admirable person. I respect you."

At Rowan's words, Ludwig seemed to feel his face heat up.

It wasn't embarrassment or shyness, but shame.

Ludwig thought he had no right to hear such words, feeling only shame.

Shouldn't people like Rowan, who were truly admirable, hear such praise?

Despite the countless people who despised and hated the priests and priestesses of

Tu'an, they tried to save others.

The truly admirable and great people were them, weren't they?

Ludwig only thought of himself as someone who had failed and been driven away, not deserving of such words.

"We'll be moving covertly, so there shouldn't be any arguments or disturbances. Ludwig, only step in if it's an extremely unlikely situation."

As if she had performed purification work more than once or twice, Rowan told Ludwig the points to be cautious about.

"Ludwig, are you good at running?"

"What? Oh… Yes, I'm confident."

Running.

It was one of the few things Ludwig was still confident in, even in his current state.

"What about carrying someone while running?"

It was clear whom he would be carrying without even mentioning it.

"I'm also confident in doing that well."

"If there's a problem, pick me up and run away as fast as you can."

Rowan smiled brightly as she said that.

If they ever had a conflict with the refugees, they would avoid the confrontation, not kill them.

"Yes, I'll make sure to do that."

Ludwig liked Rowan's approach.

Today, Ellen went on a patrol of the main road with Heinrich again.

Listening to their conversation from yesterday, it seemed like they didn't need to go, but they both left hastily after breakfast, unable to bear the itching feeling.

So, there was nothing left to do but roll around in bed for a while. Gathering information within the temple was also blocked for now.

How long had he been lying there?

-Tap tap

Turning his head while sitting on the bed, he saw a single sparrow.

A cat and a sparrow.

-Tap tap

-Chirp!

The sparrow tilted its head as it looked at him.

-Tap tap

-Chirp!

It had been a long time since he'd seen that sight.

Sarkegaar, indeed.

Outside the royal class dormitory.

Sarkegaar and I pretended to be returning students as we talked.

To be honest, there was no need for camouflage.

The temple's interior was almost desolate. There were people, but they were extremely rare. Those who could be seen were just guards.

Our blockhead had found Sarkegaar and sent him here in the meantime.

He had also heard the results of the council of elders' meeting.

It was strange that alchemy was unrelated, he said.

It wasn't as simple as creating undead like us.

Alchemy is a magic discipline that combines elements of both chemistry and biology.

Dealing with corpses, strictly speaking, is a matter of dealing with life. So, it's not strange for an alchemist to be involved.

On top of that, the research list of Antirianus I heard about further confused me, who was already bewildered.

The Empire is not conducting research or experiments.

They must be in the middle of a task with a clear outcome. There's no way they'd invest in pure academics in the midst of war, with shortages of supplies and resources.

“…That's right, there were no remains of Mullerun either."

Additionally, it was important to note that the Empire might know the method to revive a mage as a lich.

A lich is originally an undead created by a living mage who undergoes the process themselves. In other words, it's a procedure the mage performs on their own body while they're alive. Olivia said that even in the case of a death knight, their ego is maintained.

But the work we did this time was to revive a dead hero, or rather, a knight, as a death knight.

What if we revive a dead mage as an undead?

The range of options would significantly expand, and the force would undoubtedly be immense.

Furthermore, the role of mages in war is crucial.

Mages who take on large-scale attacks, barrages, and support roles indeed dominate the battlefield.

"Your Majesty, the Council of Elders has said that we may need to use force to prevent the Empire from securing such power."

“…That's true."

"I think so too."

I understand what everyone is worried about.

There were remains of mages in the Hall of Heroes. However, most of them were warriors.

But there are separate tombs for mages who left great magical achievements in the royal mausoleum. And not just there but in many other places as well.

What if they revive the remains of great archmages who left their names in human history and command them as an army?

It would be as if they had a massive mage force far surpassing the royal mage corps.

Reviving the warriors and mages who left their names in human history.

All of them would become an army to save humanity.

It's a very plausible scenario, but the problem arises when their blades are pointed at us.

There's no guarantee that there won't be a war just because Bertus has no intention of fighting us.

Wars can break out due to external factors, after all.

It's frightening that master-class forces would be greatly replenished, but the real problem is the addition of archmage forces.

Titans can't cross the sea, but a massive army could invade Edina if the archmages are reinforced to that extent.

They may not know the current situation in Edina, but if our location is discovered, such an event could really happen.

No.

It's not the army that's the problem, but the fact that about a thousand archmages equivalent to Vampire Lords might be able to drop a Titan on Edina.

I didn't want the Gate Incident, but it happened because of me.

Bertus doesn't want a war, and neither do I, but there's no way of knowing why a war might break out.

I'm convinced that I have some sort of curse that keeps encountering situations I don't want to happen.

Whether it's fate or a trickster's prank.

If we leave the Empire's research alone, we might be able to end the Gate Incident with less damage.

But if that destroys the world I've worked so hard to build.

I cannot be certain that losing everything isn't my given fate.

However, if I ruin all the projects currently in progress just because the Empire is conducting dangerous research, wouldn't that also serve the trickster's intent?

If I destroy the core project of the Empire with my own hands, war will likely break out because of this very incident.

If I attack the Empire now, war will definitely ensue. In fact, my decision on this matter may prevent the Allied Forces from advancing any further.

If I leave the Empire alone, the Gate Incident might be resolved more easily, but I could lose everything in the process.

I know that both Bertus and I have no hostility toward each other; we just haven't had a conversation about it.

If the situation changes later, it would not be due to Bertus's will but because of external factors.

No, Bertus, who doesn't want war, might be assassinated, and the new emperor may want to wage war against the Demon King.

No matter where I go, I only see a future of waging war against the Empire.

If I attack, this incident will be the justification.

If I stay silent, the world's demands will be the justification.

If I'm bound to wage war anyway, perhaps it's better to face a weakened Empire.

But if the Empire becomes stronger, I can prevent unexpected deaths like this time.

Delphin's death and Ludwig losing his arm could be avoided.

What about the countless Allied Forces soldiers I don't know?

If I leave the Empire alone, hundreds of thousands of people might survive, and if the Gate Incident ends sooner, the extra resources can be used to help refugees.

But my people in Edina.

I also have a responsibility to a nation.

Just because there are more citizens in the Empire, it doesn't mean that my country should disappear and let them live.

I cannot make such a choice.

I felt like I was standing at a crossroads of destiny.

The choices I make now will greatly change the future.

One thing I do know.

No matter what choice I make, I will surely regret it greatly.

I will suffer from nightmares for many long days again.

The issue raised by the Council of Elders is not a false alarm this time.

Revived warriors and revived mages.

The possibility of reviving mages as liches.

The problem starts with all of that.

But if this matter helps end the Gate Incident, I must also consider the option of leaving it alone.

If that army actually helps destroy the final Gate, I might have to use the Alsbringer against the otherworldly dragons when confronting them because I destroyed the Empire's new power.

In that case, obstructing the Empire's project would essentially be a suicidal act.

"And there is the most important issue."

"The most important issue?"

"There is a possibility that the Empire has joined hands with the Black Order."

"…"

I couldn't help but fall silent at Sarkegaar's words.

The Black Order.

Yes, if it involves alchemy and the undead, they would be involved.

No matter what the Empire does, the source of knowledge could be the Black Order.

Although the power of the Black Order itself has weakened, their knowledge remains, and it's not impossible that they've found a group that can use that knowledge more valuably than themselves.

However.

The Black Order tried to kill me.

They had believed that my death was necessary for humanity.

Therefore, the remnants might still desire my death.

If a hostile force has joined hands with the Empire, I must see for myself what is happening as soon as possible.

There were two ways to do this.

Either I risk meeting Bertus directly and dig into the whole story, or I send Sarkegaar to gather information.

Having a conversation with Bertus was a very dangerous thing. It was not only dangerous for me but also for Bertus.

However, Sarkegaar was not omnipotent.

Moreover, the projects the Empire is currently working on might be in a place that is difficult even for Sarkegaar to access.

"I have to meet the emperor in person."

I had no choice but to conclude that I needed to meet Bertus directly.

"Your Majesty, it's dangerous."

Naturally, Sarkegaar could only express his concern.

"There might come a time when it becomes dangerous, but that time is not now."

Just as Bertus wouldn't attack me immediately, even if he knew my whereabouts, he wouldn't try to attack me if we face each other.

We could have a conversation. I didn't know about later, but for now, a conversation was definitely possible.

CHAPTER 574

The choice to meet Bertus had always been up to me.

Bertus knew I was assisting the allied forces' advance, but he had no idea of my whereabouts. I, on the other hand, could always predict where Bertus might be.

Bertus would be staying at three different locations.

The central palace Tetra in the Imperial City.

The headquarters of the allied forces' garrison.

And now.

"Is it definitely the place that stands out?"

"Yes, it certainly seems so…"

The Magic University Research Building before my eyes.

It was certain that Bertus would be moving between one of these three places.

The Imperial Palace was, well, the Imperial Palace, and the allied forces' garrison was, after all, the garrison.

And the Magic University Research Building was where a very important research project was underway, so it was obvious he would visit regularly to keep an eye on the situation.

"Even the exterior has such strict security. It's bound to be even more difficult to get inside."

Even for Sarkegaar, some things just couldn't be done.

"Still, Your Highness, instead of risking yourself, perhaps I should…"

"Forget it. How long do I have to ask you to do everything?"

"Well, that's true, but…"

Leaving aside whether it was possible or not, it was also an excessively dangerous task. I wasn't without some anxiety, but once I heard the Black Order was involved, my heart to send Sarkegaar had long disappeared.

That didn't mean there was nothing for Sarkegaar to do.

Sarkegaar would wait until Bertus appeared nearby.

"Anyway, just like Bertus won't attack me, you won't attack him either. If Bertus shows up here, approach him. Then tell him I have something to say. That way we can have a separate conversation…"

Before I could finish my sentence,

I could see Bertus and Saviolin Turner coming out of the research building from afar.

The fact that I could find them right away meant it was less a coincidence and more a sign that the emperor frequented that place.

"You've saved some trouble."

"Your Highness… Please reconsider just once more…"

"It's fine."

Even in unfavorable situations, it could be fine.

Leaving a worried Sarkegaar behind, I began to approach the Magic University Research Building.

Emperor Bertus did not like to mobilize a large number of troops.

He didn't have an aversion to royal audiences, but Bertus had ascended to the throne during a turbulent era. It was a time when he couldn't afford to manage every little

thing, so royal audiences either disappeared or were significantly reduced.

However, this only meant that he did not mobilize 'many' troops. It didn't mean he didn't place importance on protection.

Bertus mostly moved around with Saviolin Turner. The protection provided by Turner was more than enough.

When visiting a place where confidentiality had to be maintained, it was only natural that he couldn't bring many people with him. So, when Bertus moved, Saviolin Turner took charge of everything related to security.

As a result, in addition to being the leader of Shanafel, Saviolin Turner also took on a role similar to the emperor's personal secretary.

Of course, when the allied forces were advancing or during a battle, others would take over the security duties, but now, with the temporary peace in place, Bertus was moving with Saviolin Turner.

So after stopping by the research building, Bertus and Turner were on their way back to the Imperial Palace.

Inside the temple, the streets were almost deserted and well-ordered, but it was only Bertus and Saviolin Turner who walked along the eerily quiet street.

"Things are going smoothly."

"Yes, Your Majesty."

"It would be a problem if things were too smooth, though."

As Bertus forced a smile, Turner struggled to find the right words, her expression rigid.

"I didn't think those three would produce results so quickly…”

Bertus sighed.

"No matter how many were gathered from all over the continent, the Royal Class second-years are all remarkably special."

Adelia, who created the Titan and Power Cartridge.

Christina, who made Moonshine.

And Louis Ancton and Anna de Gerna.

The Emperor.

The Princess.

The Hero.

And the Demon King.

The Royal Class second-year students were full of unusually talented individuals, to the point where one could feel a powerful destiny at play.

"By the way, how is Ludwig doing?"

"Ah…"

Saviolin Turner's complexion worsened.

"Well… It seems he's having difficulty adjusting."

"…I think I underestimated the situation."

Considering what Ludwig would face in the security forces, Bertus couldn't help but wonder if assigning him to the forces was a mistake. Bertus had a lot to do, and although he was concerned for Ludwig, he couldn't afford to be too attentive.

"Maybe it would be better if he was in charge of the training camp instead."

"I will ask for Ludwig's opinion."

"Yes, and this time…"

-Meow

Bertus stopped talking at the sound of a cat coming from somewhere.

Both Turner and Bertus had no choice but to stare at the black cat standing silently in the middle of the empty street.

"Um… what's that?"

"It's a cat."

-Meow

The black cat slowly approached the Emperor.

"It's not just any cat, Turner. It's that one."

"If you say that, then…?"

"It's the cat Ellen takes care of."

"Ah…"

"I couldn't help it at the garrison, but I'm not sure if it's right to let it roam free like this in the temple. I understand not wanting to confine it, though…"

"Well, I've never raised a cat, so I don't know…"

It would be more strange if Saviolin Turner, who had spent her entire life wielding a sword, knew how to raise a cat.

"But it's come quite far from the dormitory. Will it know its way back?"

Bertus encountered the wandering cat in an unexpected place.

Had the cat been roaming such a vast area? Bertus didn't know.

But the black cat approached Bertus.

It was odd because the last time they met, the cat had desperately tried to escape at the sight of Bertus.

Bertus crouched down to meet the approaching cat.

The cat might be lost, and Ellen might be worried.

"It seems right to take it back to the dormitory first…"

The moment Bertus reached out to lift the cat.

Suddenly.

The cat's body began to change.

-Gurgle

"!"

"Your Majesty! It's dangerous!"

Saviolin Turner forcefully pulled Bertus away, creating distance.

The cat was transforming into something.

And in an instant, as they stared at the now-formed entity, both Bertus and Saviolin Turner were dumbfounded.

"Well… it's not exactly a long time since we last met."

The black cat.

"It's been a while, hasn't it?"

The Demon King Reinhardt appeared.

The cat that Ellen had been raising suddenly transformed into Reinhardt.

There was no way to know why it happened, the reason behind it, or the purpose of it.

Even if they couldn't understand the situation, what they saw before them was the truth.

With a pale complexion, Saviolin Turner drew her Gale Sword and hid Bertus behind her.

"Stop. Don't come any closer."

Saviolin Turner's expression was full of fear, though she had no intention of being an enemy.

It wasn't just Saviolin Turner who was confused by the unexpected turn of events.

"Reinhardt…?"

Bertus also swallowed nervously, taken aback by the unfolding situation.

"I understand you're shocked, but I didn't come here to fight. If I did, I wouldn't have shown up like this."

There were many better ways to kill them if that had been his intention.

There must have been a reason for him to reveal himself so blatantly.

"I'd like to talk in a quiet place. It's been a while."

As time had changed many things, Reinhardt had changed too.

"I can't stay outside in this form for long, you know that, right?"

Although there was not a single person on the street, walking around the temple in Reinhardt's form would have been insane.

Bertus stared at the suddenly appearing Reinhardt with a stern expression.

"Your Majesty…"

Saviolin Turner also gazed at the Emperor with a bewildered look.

"Alright. Let's go inside somewhere, anywhere."

It would be no better for the Emperor to be seen with the Demon King appearing in the temple.

Bertus and Turner knew better than anyone that the Demon King was helping humanity. Thus, they also knew that he hadn't suddenly revealed himself to fight.

Most of the buildings in the temple were empty, which was true for both schools and shops.

So they entered an empty cafe on the second floor of a nearby vacant building.

The door was locked, but that wasn't a problem for any of them in this situation.

Using the Aura Blade, they sliced through the door's lock, and the three of them took their seats.

There was dust on the table and chairs, but none of them paid attention to it.

All they needed was a place to talk.

"There's one thing I'd like to make clear. Let's not bring up the cat issue, it's not important and I don't want to talk about it."

Looking at the nonchalant face of Reinhardt, Bertus couldn't help but realize how he had changed over time.

He had become more shameless than before.

"Alright… Let's just assume that. I don't think I have any idea why, anyway."

He must have wanted to watch over Ellen.

And now they knew why he had had a fit when Ellen tried to entrust the cat to the Emperor.

Reinhardt, with his arms crossed, murmured quietly.

"Let's not dwell on the past either. Who did what wrong, where did things go wrong, that kind of talk."

Discussions about mistakes were also pointless.

Now, with the reality they had to face in front of them, talking about each other's responsibilities would only worsen the situation.

The Demon King had warned that if he wasn't released, his subordinates would cause the Gate incident, but the Emperor did not release him.

And so, the Gate incident occurred.

But now, discussing that matter held no meaning.

They had issues to face and problems to solve.

Everything else was meaningless, save for focusing on that.

At Reinhardt's words, Bertus nodded.

"You know we were clearing the path ahead of the alliance forces, right?"

"Yes, I knew."

Bertus looked at Reinhardt and asked,

"Can you really manipulate the weather?"

"Only to a limited extent."

Reinhardt didn't explicitly mention that it was the Supernatural ability of Liana de Grantz.

Upon hearing that something impossible for any wizard was possible, Bertus and Turner couldn't help but tense up.

"Don't worry. If I wanted to use that power to destroy humanity, you know what would have happened a long time ago, right?"

"…"

"…"

If the demon king were to cause havoc in the middle of the empire while the alliance

forces were fully committed, the empire would be reduced to ashes.

However, knowing that it might happen and actually hearing the demon king confirm that he could do it were two different things.

Humanity should have perished long ago if it weren't for the demon king's mercy.

But most people, ignorant of this fact, despise the demon king.

If the demon king really wanted to annihilate humanity, it would only take a day, but no one thinks about that.

If the demon king threatens the emperor with humanity's survival at stake, the empire and humanity must listen to him, no matter what he says.

But so far, the demon king has never interfered with humanity in that way.

"I didn't come here suddenly to threaten or extort you. I just have a question."

Reinhardt asked calmly.

"One of our main forces is the Death Knights. We used a lot of them in the Serandia battle this time. So, we wanted to replenish them like last time."

At that, both Turner and Bertus listened silently to Reinhardt's words.

"So, we tried to resurrect the corpses as Death Knights from the Hall of Heroes in the royal mausoleum."

“…What?!"

Both Bertus and Turner were taken aback by this. They couldn't help but be shocked when they heard that he had tried to break into the royal mausoleum for no reason.

"The method is a secret, but anyway, we managed to get in."

What's more, they had already infiltrated it without their knowledge.

Bertus listened to the story with a pale face.

"But… as you know, all the coffins were empty."

"I wonder if it's only the royal mausoleum. We also confirmed that the bodies of the fallen warriors from the alliance forces were replaced and buried in the national cemetery."

"Like we tried to create Death Knights, it seems the empire is up to some bizarre things as well… but I don't know much about it."

"We were trying to find out secretly rather than making contact, but it seemed like there was a limit to that. So, I came here directly."

"I don't intend to say that you shouldn't do such things, or that you can't do them. I'm doing something similar myself."

"But we need to know what's going on. My people are very uneasy, and you might have even joined forces with those who might be my enemies."

"There are only two things I want to ask."

The demon king stared at the emperor.

"What's going on at Temple Magic University?"

The true nature of the research.

"Is it true that you've joined hands with the Black Order?"

And the suspicious alliance.

"I suppose I should explain."

The Demon King had two questions.

What research was being conducted at Temple Magic University?

And whether they had indeed joined forces with the Black Order.

Silence ensued.

As Turner would not speak before Bertus, the Demon King focused solely on Bertus.

If the Demon King had not approached them, they might not have known. But now that the Demon King had come forth to ask directly…

It was impossible to remain silent now that the Demon King had appeared, even if they had not engaged in such activities before.

"I knew you were watching us… but finding that out was a bit surprising."

Bertus said with a bitter smile.

"Yes. We're doing something with the corpses of the fallen heroes and warriors."

Bertus slowly nodded.

"But I have no idea what you're talking about regarding the Black Order."

"Really?"

The Demon King carefully observed the Emperor's expression.

It was difficult to discern the truth from his face.

Whether it was ignorance or the truth, it was impossible to tell just by looking at his face.

"At least as far as I know, we haven't cooperated with the Black Order."

Saying this, the Emperor shrugged his shoulders.

"There's no need to doubt. You know, right?"

"What?"

"Considering we're meddling with the corpses to end the Gate incident, would there have been anything we couldn't handle, even if it was the hand of the Black Order? No matter how much they tried to kill you."

It was strange to think that some things were possible while others were not while

they were already engaged in dreadful acts.

"So, you're saying that if the Black Order had approached you, you would have joined forces with them?"

"Yes. But that never happened. And if we had joined forces, there would be no reason for me to deceive you in this situation. It wouldn't benefit me in any way."

"Hmm…"

As Bertus had said.

At the point of touching everything that could help them, there was nothing the Empire couldn't handle from the Black Order. Seeing the Demon King's dubious expression, Bertus gave a bitter smile.

"People just don't believe me when I tell the truth."

Bertus laughed bitterly, saying that when he told the truth, people doubted him.

"First, I can show you what we were doing."

At that, somewhat surprisingly, the Demon King appeared slightly taken aback.

CHAPTER 575

I had anticipated that I would be able to engage in a conversation with Bertus, and I was aware that he would most likely have to comply with my requests, given the situation.

I had chosen the option to take a risk and meet Bertus directly.

The danger wasn't that something would happen to me or Bertus when we met, but rather that someone might eventually learn of our meeting, through whatever means.

Knowing this, it wasn't difficult to get to the heart of the matter once I had met Bertus and spoken with him directly. However, I hadn't expected him to show me exactly what they were working on.

Bertus issued an order to Saviolin Turner.

He commanded her to evacuate everyone from the Magic University Research Building for three hours.

Of course, I would change my appearance, but it wouldn't be good for anyone to see the emperor entering the laboratory with an unidentified person.

After Saviolin Turner left to deliver the order, Bertus and I sat in an empty dining hall and talked until all the preparations were complete.

"How is Charlotte… getting along?"

Bertus' expression was complex as he asked the question.

There was a time when they had hated each other so much that they had tried to kill each other, but at some point, Bertus began to pity Charlotte.

Bertus had decided to execute Charlotte, but in reality, he had called for me.

And I had left with Charlotte.

Bertus had wanted to save Charlotte.

"She's doing her part. She's probably better off than when she was in the imperial palace."

"Is that so…”

Bertus spoke with a sad expression.

"Thank you, Reinhardt."

Perhaps he was thanking me for appearing to save Charlotte.

That meaning might be there, and there might be other meanings as well.

My relationship with Bertus was quite different from the past.

Now, Bertus was technically my subordinate.

He might not be aware of how much power I held compared to him.

Guilt.

He felt tremendous guilt toward me, and he couldn't help but feel that way since he was still using me.

Upon hearing about Charlotte's whereabouts, Bertus seemed somewhat relieved.

There wasn't much more conversation between us.

Three years might seem like a long time, but in some ways, it wasn't that long.

However, during those three years, the survivors had experienced too many events.

Our official conversation was over, and there were too many obstacles to share personal conversations.

We couldn't know what would happen in the future.

"Is there anything else I should know about the Gate incident?"

There wasn't much I could say in response to Bertus' question.

"Just keep doing what you're doing now."

The last Gate.

That was not Bertus' responsibility, so that was all I could say.

When Saviolin Turner returned, the emperor's orders had been fully executed.

Everyone had left the laboratory without leaving a single trace, and the guards had vacated their positions as well.

With my face changed using Sarkegaar's ring and wearing a reversed robe, I headed to the magic university research building with Bertus.

"It seems like it would have been impossible to sneak in here."

Passing through several layers of security gates just to enter the underground research lab, it was uncertain whether even Sarkegaar could have bypassed this system.

"Dreadfiend might have found a way. While coming to me directly might have been a convenient choice for you, it wouldn't have been the only one."

For nearly two years, Bertus had held onto Sarkegaar.

Naturally, he knew all about the Dreadfiend clan.

"Anna and Christina suggested it first."

"What?"

Although I didn't fully understand the meaning of his words, I couldn't help but ask.

By suggesting, he obviously meant the very matter I was going to witness with my own eyes.

"Even if it's a terrible method, if it helps end the Gate crisis, should we do it?"

"Anna and… Christina suggested it first?"

"Yes. Louis joined later."

It wasn't Bertus, but Anna and Christina who had made the suggestion first.

No one was left unchanged by the war, and comparing the current events to the original work seemed almost laughable.

Whether it was due to the terrible things that happened, or something else entirely.

Had Anna and Christina really come up with the idea of reanimating the fallen as undead and rejoining the battle, and proposed it to the Emperor?

Just like Adelia had created the Titan.

No, perhaps not.

Seeing Adelia's involvement in the Titan project, Anna and Christina might have also thought that they had to do something.

The Titan didn't exist in the original work.

That Titan must have inspired Anna and Christina, and so they came up with their own way to contribute to the war.

"I struggled with the decision. For a long time."

Bertus spoke as we descended into the underground laboratory.

"Very… very long."

It was a disgrace to the corpses of the fallen, to those whose deaths seemed too premature.

I could feel how much anguish Bertus went through before accepting and deciding to go through with it.

In the end, Bertus must have given his permission.

And he must have decided to even use the tombs of the heroes in the royal mausoleum.

So, I saw it.

What Bertus had been creating next after the Titan.

"This is…"

A massive culture fluid vat.

"Is this… an undead?"

"Yes."

Inside, there was a perfectly clean human body without a single wound.

To the naked eye, it was certainly not the corpse of someone who had died from external injuries.

The other vats were no different.

It wasn't hard to find out why the corpses of those who had no choice but to die from external injuries were so clean and intact.

"Did you… regenerate them?"

"Yes, we are regenerating the missing or decayed flesh and muscles."

It meant that they weren't merely preserving the corpses, but almost restoring them to their original state.

Such vats were placed throughout the underground laboratory.

"Homunculus is alchemy that creates life."

"Yes, that's right."

"That's why Homunculus is known as magic that creates something from nothing. That's why the failure rate is high. You can't create life easily."

Bertus gazed at the body of an unknown individual, their eyes closed and still.

"Homunculus is magic that seeks the truth of life. But we don't need to explore the ultimate truth of Homunculus. We need a Homunculus that can be weaponized. So, there's no need to create something from nothing."

"Did you create something from something?"

"Yes."

To be precise, it was a matter of breathing life back into what was once alive.

"Making something that no longer functions as life functional again. They say it's easier than creating a real Homunculus."

Homunculus originally involved creating life forms that did not previously exist, but in this case, it was about reconstructing a known life form.

If one understood the structure of humans well, they could create humans, and the raw material had already been human.

With the Homunculus technique, they would restore the vanished, broken, or rotten flesh, muscles, and organs.

This was different from the undead.

The undead were dead things that moved.

But this was about granting something life-like to a dead body.

"It sounds like you're saying… you can resurrect the dead."

"No, that's not it. I have no intention of researching that far, and it's probably impossible. Just because we restore their appearance from when they were alive, doesn't mean they're truly brought back."

Bertus, Turner, and I walked through the underground laboratory.

Unrecognizable corpses were being restored. They could be the fallen soldiers of the Allied forces, people who had died since the Gate Incident, or long-dead heroes of the past.

"In the end, this is what it is. We revive the dead's flesh with the Homunculus technique, attach the false flesh that shouldn't be compatible with real flesh using Chimera technology, animate them with dark magic, and create something almost similar to their former selves, or even more powerful… I suppose we can't call them undead."

Bertus looked at me.

"We're making golems. That's what we're doing."

Technically, living golems.

Although many forbidden techniques from numerous fields of magic were involved, in the end, their function was that of a living golem.

Using the remains of those who were once alive, they create golems to be reintroduced into the war.

These golems are more potent than they were when they were alive.

"Can you also revive magicians?"

"That's still in the testing phase, but it's been proven possible."

A concern of Edina's people, and it is also certain.

"What about priests?"

“…What?"

"Clergymen can be revived as well. In a state where they can use divine power. I don't know why they can, though."

At that point, I had nothing more to say about the injustice of this world.

"Yeah… I knew the Five Great Gods were not normal."

Chimera, Homunculus, and dark magic.

In the end, through the harmony of alchemy and dark magic, the empire managed to resurrect the corpses of heroes with their former abilities nearly intact and manipulate them as they pleased.

"Do they have a sense of self?"

"No, they don't. It would be troublesome if they did. It's a relief that they don't."

They were merely dolls, bearing a striking resemblance to the humans they once were.

Strictly speaking, it was unclear whether they should be called undead, but ultimately, they were like both the undead and golems.

"Not everyone can be revived this way. If the damage is too severe, the regeneration process may not progress, or they may not respond to control even after regeneration."

Bertus added that the success rate was roughly 70%.

To me, that seemed like an incredibly high percentage.

"If control fails… it seems like something terrible could happen. Am I being overly worried?"

While Death Knights are strong, they do not restore their abilities from when they were alive. However, in this case, they do restore their previous abilities.

Reviving a Swordmaster would give you a Swordmaster, and reviving an Archmage would give you an Archmage.

The mere thought of what might happen if they lost control of them was enough to make my head explode.

In response to my question, Bertus sneered.

"Reinhardt, it's a war where the fate of all existence hangs in the balance."

"…"

"We can't avoid taking such risks, can we?"

It's a situation where we would even need to borrow a cat's paw.

If we need to borrow a cat's paw, is there any reason not to borrow the hand of a demon?

As long as that demon's hand saves me from danger first, what happens next is of little importance.

I understood Bertus's words.

Will these things save us?

Or will they plunge us into another abyss?

"But… it seems that they are not yet ready for actual deployment. I only see those that are still being cultivated."

I wasn't sure what to call these things, but since I couldn't see any finished products, it seemed they were not yet ready for actual deployment. Would the battlefield change the moment these things came out of the fort?

"No."

But to my question, Bertus shook his head.

"They have already entered the trial phase."

“…What?"

"You've seen it too, haven't you?"

Bertus pointed upward with his finger.

Above ground.

"Didn't you think there were too many guards at the temple?"

“…Huh?"

"Weren't there an unusually large number of guards around here?"

Come to think of it, the security near the Magic University was very strict.

An immense number of guards patrolled the area near the Magic University.

"If there were so many extra guards, they would have been sent to places like refugee camps. Do you think they deployed so many to guard the Magic University considering the number of people at the temple?"

It turned out that most of the guards near the Magic University were Homunculus Undead.

No one would notice, but all the guards wore helmets.

That's why there was no occasion to see their faces.

No one is curious about what face is under the helmet in the first place.

"They're testing whether they can properly understand commands. They are exterminating monsters on the outskirts of the Imperial Capital."

Only then did I understand why Ellen and Heinrich couldn't find any monsters near the Imperial Capital.

The extermination squad that cleared monsters on the outskirts of the Imperial Capital.

They were revived corpses that had nothing to do with the guards in the first place.

The area around the Imperial Capital had already become an experimental ground for checking whether the revived corpses could be properly used.

No one could join the extermination mission for entirely different reasons.

"Once winter passes, they will all be deployed to the field."

The actual deployment was already underway.

There's no need to see how much power they can exert or how helpful they can be – it's obvious.

"If we can end the Gate Incident with just these… It might sound ridiculous, but we might not need the Alliance forces anymore."

If war could have been waged with just the army of the revived, and their individual abilities were even greater than before, there might have been no need for large-scale troops.

The Gate Incident could have ended sooner, and there might have been no further great sacrifices.

By doing what should not have been done, we could have prevented further sacrifices.

It had been an all-too-sweet temptation.

I had been swayed by merely creating a Death Knight, but Bertus had faced a greater temptation.

It had been an unavoidable choice, and the thought that it was necessary didn't go away.

CHAPTER 576

Reviving a dead friend.

If it had been completely impossible, they wouldn't have even attempted it.

However, if it was somewhat possible, the fact that it couldn't be perfectly successful would only lead people to despair.

In this absurd world, it seemed that death was an immutable truth that could not be overturned by anything.

If they couldn't save Asher, they wouldn't have even tried for Delphin, whose body couldn't be found.

This was merely a restoration that seemed like a resurrection.

While they could have their abilities, strength, and appearance from when they were alive, they wouldn't possess a sense of self.

It was nothing more than a moving taxidermy.

It could be used for combat, but not for relationships.

Although it might be more useful in battle than before, it was useless to those who truly hoped for a resurrection. And it shouldn't be used for such purposes.

The topic of Asher silenced us.

I didn't bring it up anymore.

If the dead could return, everyone would think about it.

Not only Christina, Anna, and Louis Ancton, but Bertus, and even Saviolin Turner would have no choice but to think about it as well.

"Reinhardt."

"Yeah."

"We can't justify all of this."

"I didn't know you were the type to worry about that."

"I didn't think I'd be the one to worry about it either."

Bertus lets out a bitter laugh.

Previously as a prince and a pauper, we now faced each other as an emperor and a demon king.

"I have something to apologize for."

"If it's about the past, I don't need an apology. I told you before."

"No, it's not about that."

Bertus takes the lead.

"Follow me."

As we followed Bertus, larger pods started to appear. They were three times larger than the others, and it was evident that restoration work was being carried out on very important corpses, even if their faces couldn't be recognized.

Bertus stopped in front of a certain culture pod and looked at me.

As if to tell me to look inside.

In front of me was someone's corpse.

A white-haired old man.

"We've had this body all along. I somewhat expected it, but even after the restoration was successful, he didn't open his eyes. In other words… it was a failure. I know he must have been important to you… I'm sorry. I had to use everything I could. Not telling you… not cooperating with the Black Order, it wasn't me trying to deceive you on purpose. You have every right to resent me, but…"

"Who is this?"

What was this about in the first place?

Why did you apologize for this?

As I was confused, both Bertus and Saviolin Turner were taken aback.

It was as if they were surprised that I didn't know.

"No, you have to tell me so I can either forgive or get angry, right? Who was this person…"

An old man.

White hair.

Apologies.

"Wait a second."

I thought I had a rough idea.

"Was this… that person?"

Who was it?

I couldn't remember the name.

"Larken Simonstite."

Saviolin Turner answered on his behalf.

"The Darkland's Warlord and my mentor."

That was right, that person.

Saviolin Turner seemed to recall something and slowly nodded.

"Come to think of it, you said you had lost all memories of being the prince of

Darkland…”

"Ah…”

Bertus finally seemed to remember and nodded as well.

The person I needed to recognize was someone I couldn't even recall, let alone their face, but Bertus ended up apologizing as if it were his own fault.

And yet…

No matter how hard I thought about it.

It was strange how I couldn't recognize the face of the former Four Heavenly Kings.

Larken Simonstite.

He was the former commander of the Shanafel unit and once the continent's greatest sword, having reached the rank of Grandmaster.

He retired and stepped down from the frontlines, but for some reason, after the outbreak of the demon war, he became one of the Four Heavenly Kings in the Demon King's army.

For that reason, he was hated by all of humanity.

After the demon war, Larken Simonstite's corpse was taken by the empire. There was no real reason not to take it.

But after the Gate Incident, Bertus had no reason not to use Larken's corpse in the process of resurrecting many war heroes.

If they could revive him while maintaining his full abilities as a Grandmaster, he would be an incredibly powerful force.

However, just as they could not succeed in turning all corpses into golems, Larken Simonstite's corpse did not revive. It was unknown whether some measures had been taken or if it was just a failure.

Anyway, Bertus apologized, thinking that Larken might have been precious to me, and the situation got even weirder when I couldn't remember Larken at all.

No, by now, he should believe most of what I say, but he still can't believe that I have no memory of Darkland?

It wasn't that he didn't believe it, but rather he hadn't considered it.

Honestly, I didn't feel any guilt about trying to use Larken's corpse.

What should I have known to get angry or not?

I couldn't empathize with the feelings towards the previous Demon Kings, so there was no way I could empathize with the Four Heavenly Kings.

"Are there corpses of the other Heavenly Kings as well?"

Bertus shook his head in response to my question.

"No, the reason we originally retrieved this corpse was to study whether magical means were used in Larken's betrayal."

"Ah… I see."

The corpse was retrieved to determine if magic had been used to brainwash the Grandmaster.

"Of course, Larken wasn't brainwashed."

I knew everything I needed to know.

What the empire was doing. What was actually happening.

It was an ethically disastrous, dangerous, and potentially threatening later on.

There was no denying the need to stop it.

But there were just as many reasons to leave it alone.

The research has already progressed significantly and is now in the practical

application stage.

Golems were already being deployed as guards near the Magic University, as well as in the extermination squads patrolling the outskirts of the empire and hunting monsters.

They wore helmets so that no one could recognize them.

It was only natural for guards to be armed, so no one would suspect anything.

"Reinhardt, if this army is deployed, the Allied Forces may end the war sooner than expected. It could even be in the blink of an eye."

"Probably."

If countless heroes from history were to be resurrected, humanity's strength would be raised to unprecedented levels.

It would be incomparable even to the heyday of the demonic war.

No matter how numerous the monsters of the Gate are, would that be a problem? Perhaps even the dragons from other worlds might be hunted down in vain.

The end of the Gate Incident seemed genuinely close at hand.

The sight I saw was both horrifying and overwhelmingly impressive.

Their army might have posed a threat to Edina and me, but ultimately, the last warp gate was our top priority.

This army of the dead could have been the key to preventing me from using the Alsbringer at the last moment.

What came after was for later.

"Sooner or later, I'll have to pay the price for all of this."

"…"

"Reinhardt, we need to talk."

Bertus spoke with a resolute look on his face.

I had a conversation with Bertus. It wasn't a long one.

The price for all of this.

Someone has to pay it.

There was some other small talk, but that was the main point.

So, I decided not to interfere with the Empire and this project.

It's not something I can meddle with anyway.

I concluded that I must accept that they were not involved with the Black Order, even if it goes beyond trust.

Ultimately, a choice has to be made.

Whether it's a choice that leaves only regret, or a better one, is unknowable at this stage.

After the conversation, I went out to the lobby.

Saviolin Turner looked at me. She felt strong suspicion and doubt about the decision made by Larken Simonstite and was furious.

She considered him a traitor who betrayed humanity and hated him for it.

But now, Saviolin Turner may not know what that betrayal was about.

"Lady Turner, I don't know much about who Larken Simonstite is."

"…"

"But the previous Demon King, Valier, wanted to create a new world through the Akasha he took from Cantus Magna and migrate all demons to that world."

I had clearly seen the letter left by the previous Demon King.

"Larken Simonstite probably sympathized with the Demon King's intention."

Only the Demon King himself, me, and the Four Heavenly Kings knew the true purpose of the previous Valier.

Larken Simonstite would have tried to help complete the Akasha.

"Everyone must have hated fighting."

If the demons disappeared, the struggle between demons and humans would vanish, and there would be no more fighting.

But because Akasha was such a powerful weapon, there could be no dialogue or persuasion between the two sides.

They fought without understanding each other, and one side was annihilated.

"That… must… have been the case…"

Saviolin Turner hung her head and said nothing.

In the end, they wanted peace.

The desires and hopes of all beings are so simple as to be trivial.

To be happy.

Not to be hurt.

To wish for a peaceful world.

These simple and intuitive desires lead to different actions.

Some dream of a new world for peace.

Some draw their swords for peace.

"What happened to… Akasha?"

"I'm not sure. We probably can't use it again."

Where Akasha originated from has become unknowable.

In the world, only the consequences of Akasha's misuse remained. We had to resolve those issues, gather what was left in the world, and grasp even a meager tranquility.

My business there was done.

It had been more dangerous than I had thought, but I had decided to leave the Empire alone.

There would be no turning back.

"Are you leaving?"

"Yeah, I should go. What's the point of staying here any longer?"

Bertus looked somewhat regretful.

"Wait, how can I find you if I need to?"

As I was about to turn away, Bertus asked.

No, he phrased it a bit oddly.

"You know exactly what's going on now, don't you?"

"The dormitory."

“…Huh?"

"I will be in the dormitory. Probably in Ellen's room."

"…?"

"I'll be here all winter. If you have anything to say, come visit."

As soon as I turned into a cat, Turner and Bertus's expressions became quite amusing.

-Meow

"…"

"…"

Now, I couldn't feel embarrassed anymore.

Why weren't they even slightly shocked by my appearance?

-Nyaa

"What a crazy… little thing…"

When I pretended to be cute and playful, their expressions became even more entertaining.

Honestly, I was quite cute.

I did look cute when I saw myself in the mirror in that form.

Ludwig was assigned a special mission.

His task was to protect a priestess who purified the plague that had broken out in the refugee zone.

Ludwig and Rowan exchanged various stories as they headed toward the area where the plague had spread.

"Will you not receive an escort from the Holy Knight Order…?"

It was too dangerous for a single priestess to wander around. Wouldn't it be safer to be escorted by disguised holy knights? Rowan shook her head at Ludwig's question.

"If we had the manpower, it would be better to send priests to more places."

"…I see."

In the face of an absolute shortage of manpower, they had no choice but to disperse like this. Ludwig nodded in understanding.

Most priests and holy knights were dispatched to the battlefield, making the lack of manpower even more severe.

"Excuse me if this is rude, but… how did you lose your arm?"

"I was bitten by a snake."

"A snake…?"

"It was a snake with petrifying venom. It wasn't a large snake… but monsters aren't necessarily less dangerous just because they're small."

"I see…"

Rowan couldn't hide her sorrow as she looked at Ludwig's empty sleeve.

"It's alright. It's better than losing my life."

Was it better to lose an arm and survive than to die and never return? Ludwig couldn't be sure but thought he had to say something like that for now.

The lost arm wasn't important.

It was painful to think of the other things he had lost.

"By the way, how serious is the plague problem…?"

Ludwig forcibly changed the subject.

"The individual plague cases themselves are not that severe. Not all plagues lead to death. Most of them are like minor colds."

"Is that so?"

"Yes, but the important thing is that a healthy person catching a cold and a weakened person catching a cold are completely different."

"Ah… I see."

A cold for a healthy person may last a few days, but for a weakened person, it could be a life-threatening illness.

"The basic conditions are so poor. Even if they recover from the illness, their weakened bodies will continue to die, and there's nothing we can do to stop it."

Deaths due to weakness were not illnesses and could not be cured.

People who were already weakened, even if they were saved from the plague, would still die because their strength was exhausted. That could not be prevented.

"And if those corpses are left to rot, it will lead to another plague. It's a chain reaction."

At Rowan's words, Ludwig's complexion darkened even further.

"At least it's winter now, so decomposition is slower. That's why there are fewer plagues than last summer. Of course, we can't call this a fortunate situation."

The cold prevented the abandoned corpses from decaying.

However, one could not call it fortunate, as the cold itself was killing people.

The epidemic itself was problematic, but the more important issue was the harsh environment. People were dying from diseases they should not have died from. Consequently, Rowan emphasized that even if they purified this epidemic, another would inevitably arise, making this work always a temporary solution.

Rowan was someone who had to pour water into a leaking jar, knowing it was futile.

"Most importantly, there is a severe shortage of priests. Most of the Holy Knights and priests have been deployed to the frontlines, and the number of priests of Tu'an has drastically decreased. Many have died, but even more have converted to other faiths or abandoned their beliefs altogether."

"Ah… I see."

"Yes, it's because of the Demon King…"

Countless followers felt betrayed by their god who chose the Demon King and renounced their faith. Would priests have been any different? The number of priests in Tu'an and Als Order had drastically decreased compared to before.

Most of the remaining priests and Holy Knights were sent to the frontlines.

So, it was only natural that the priests of the Tu'an Order, who had to deal with epidemics, were always in short supply.

Moreover, for the priests of Tu'an, the refugee areas, and even the entire Imperial Capital region, were as dangerous as, if not more so than, the battlefield.

Ludwig began to think that Rowan's work, purifying epidemics in Imperial Capital, where no one praised her and everyone hated her, might be even more dangerous and noble than going to war.

Rowan was wandering in search of a task that needed to be done in a place where no one praised her and everyone despised her.

And she did not give up on her faith in Tu'an.

"As a human, I often wonder."

Rowan spoke quietly as they walked.

Looking down at the ground, Rowan said,

"What kind of being is the Demon King?"

The Demon King.

That word was like a stone stuck in his throat.

For most people, the Demon King was a symbol of hatred and despair.

Rumors about the nature of the Demon King were rampant.

However, Ludwig was not a person who had only encountered rumors.

That was why he hated the Demon King even more.

Because he had lived with the Demon King without knowing who he was, in close proximity.

"He was my classmate."

“…What?"

"I lived with the Demon King at the temple."

"!"

Rowan stared at Ludwig with her mouth wide open.

Only then did Ludwig truly realize that, for better or worse, he could not help but be treated as a special being simply because he had been with another special being.

CHAPTER 577

Everyone who needed to know was aware that the Demon King had infiltrated the temple.

The fact that he even shared a class with the Emperor, Princess, and the Hero revealed his malicious and wicked nature.

The Demon King observed the most important people of the empire from up close and studied the empire itself. He even tried to secretly pull the prince and princess to his side.

However, in the end, the Demon King's identity was exposed, and those captured by him dared to betray humanity, rescuing the Demon King and fleeing.

No one knew what the Demon King's true intentions were, but he caused the Gate Incident to annihilate humanity.

Those who had betrayed humanity and were loyal to the Demon King.

And among the Royal Class second-year students, including Ellen, some had become extremely important figures.

Emperor Bertus de Gardias.

Hero Ellen Artorius.

Adelia, the creator of the Power Cartridge and Titan.

Heinrich, the pyrokinetic.

Christina, the creator of Moonshine.

Ludwig hadn't been very conscious of the fact that they were his classmates, but upon seeing Rowan's astonishment, he realized anew that even excluding the Demon King and Ellen, his classmates were formidable figures not easily discussed.

Rowan looked at Ludwig with a mix of fear and curiosity, as if she was both scared and unable to resist asking.

"What kind of being was the Demon King?"

"…"

What kind of being was Reinhardt?

During his first year, Reinhardt was a member of Class A, but he was a below-average student. Ludwig could not be sure whether this was a genuine representation of his abilities or a false facade to hide his true power.

Although not in the same class, Ludwig had seen various aspects of the Demon King.

He was violent and rough, but not necessarily evil.

However, with the Gate Incident occurring, Reinhardt could not be considered anything but evil.

"I'm… not really sure."

Because they had spent time together, Ludwig felt he knew even less about Reinhardt than he thought, and he couldn't help but feel pathetic for it.

"I thought I knew him a little, but now that I think about it, I guess I didn't."

"…I see."

Ludwig stared blankly at the ash-colored winter sky.

"However, the Demon King… eventually… must…"

As a weakling and a loser, there was only one thing Ludwig could do.

"I just hope he'll pay the price for everything."

A longing for divine punishment that didn't exist.

And a curse.

That was all.

Rowan and Ludwig crossed the quarantine line and entered the area where the epidemic had broken out.

Both Ludwig and Rowan wore masks.

The area affected by the epidemic was still under strict control, just like the day before. When Rowan showed some kind of mark, the guards obediently let them pass.

"…"

"Seeing this all the time because of my job, but I can never get used to it."

As they entered the area affected by the epidemic, Ludwig couldn't help but feel the atmosphere was distinctly different from the outside.

Everywhere was gloomy and oppressive, but within the cold air, the smell of death was strong enough to be sensed.

Guards pulling carts were loading emaciated corpses and heading somewhere, and smoke rose in the direction the carts were going.

Ludwig imagined a horrific and grotesque plague that spread like wildfire, devouring people as soon as he heard the words "contagious disease."

However, there were no signs on the corpses that resembled the marks of a plague.

People had simply died from being too weak, succumbing to an equally weak disease.

Ludwig watched with a somber expression as those who had died from such a trivial illness were loaded onto carts and taken away.

The entire area was under quarantine, so even those who were not infected would soon catch the disease and die.

This scene would be unfolding in various places across the imperial capital's refugee camps.

Even if they purified this area, it would not be the end.

New contagious diseases would continue to emerge, and as long as the root cause remained unresolved, people would keep dying from these seemingly insignificant plagues.

"What do we do now…?"

"We'll walk the streets, offering prayers of purification. Just follow me."

"Is that safe? If someone sees us offering prayers…"

Rowan shook her head at the mention of the potential danger.

"Ludwig."

"Yes, Priestess?"

"Do you think there is anyone here with enough strength left to grab my collar? If there were, that would actually be fortunate."

"Ah…"

"Extreme situations are typically only a remote possibility. Most likely, there won't be any need for you to step in."

Rowan offered a reassuring smile, saying that although she had encountered problems before, they were far from common occurrences.

Most people didn't even have the energy to express their hatred and resentment through violence.

If they happened to encounter such people, all he had to do was flee, carrying Rowan with him.

"And it's not like I'll be singing hymns loudly. Most people will think I'm just a crazy woman wandering around, muttering to myself."

Rowan spoke playfully, trying to reassure Ludwig, and he couldn't help but let out a hollow laugh despite the situation.

However, her words were not a joke but a serious statement.

As Ludwig watched Rowan walk through the gloomy streets, muttering prayers with her head bowed, she truly appeared to be nothing more than a deranged woman.

There was no brilliant white light, nor a gentle golden radiance.

Rowan walked through the spaces between the unprocessed corpses and the shanties filled with coughing sounds, uttering incomprehensible prayers.

Her murmurs seemed ominous if only half-heard, but if listened to carefully, they clearly contained the content of purification prayers offered to the Goddess of Purity, Tu'an.

The only assurance that something was going right was that the stench that had been wafting through the streets despite the cold weather was beginning to disappear.

Rowan simply took cautious steps beside him, reciting her prayers.

Later on, other areas might be struck by contagious diseases, but the dreadful illness in these streets would certainly vanish, and the sick would be healed.

‘O Pure Will that expels corruption, depravity, and nightmares… ’

Ludwig suddenly found the entire situation strange.

The fact that this contagious disease, which caused countless people to die in vain—even if it wasn't a lethal illness—could be eradicated by the prayers of just one person, a single priestess, struck him as utterly remarkable.

How could such a thing be possible?

Was this the power and miracle of the gods?

No matter how much people felt betrayed by two of the Five Great Gods and denied their existence, the gods' powers were so immense that they brought great benefit to humanity.

Ludwig suddenly realized.

Regardless of the outcome of the current situation, as long as humanity survived,

The power of the gods was eternal, and people would restore their faith to receive the blessings and powers of Tu’an and Als.

Divine power was different from all other acts that used mana as a resource.

Though the capacity of each priest may vary, divine power did not require any compensation.

Apart from other mysteries and supernatural abilities, divine power was a miracle without cost, manifested only through the act of belief.

Why did the gods…

Bestow such great miracles upon the world?

Why did the gods…

Choose such beings?

The prayer was long.

Not only was the area affected by the plague vast, but Rowan also walked very slowly as she prayed.

The purification of the entire area was completed by evening. Thankfully, the work was finished without any issues.

"Now it seems we have somewhat wrapped up… Hmm. Yes. Huh! Mm!"

Having recited prayers for over eight hours, Rowan's throat was nearly worn out. Her voice was hoarse and tinged with metallic undertones.

It couldn't be helped since she had prayed for eight hours without taking a single sip of water.

She could have healed her own throat, but whether it was to avoid conspicuous behavior or not, Rowan only cleared her throat with a few coughs.

Wondering if she always had to do this, Ludwig stared blankly at Rowan.

She stretched her body languidly.

"Ugh! Mm…! Oh dear, what a strange sound… Anyway, it's fortunate that nothing happened today."

"Yes… You've worked hard, Priestess."

"Anyway…"

Looking at Ludwig with slightly drooping, weary eyes, Rowan asked,

"What were you thinking about so deeply?"

Noticing Ludwig's troubled expression even during her prayers, Rowan inquired, seemingly curious.

There was no particular incident, nor was there any threat.

So, while being by Rowan's side for such a long time, Ludwig felt troubled.

He saw the greatness of the gods.

And he saw their inscrutability.

It invoked fear, despair, and hope all at once.

That's what gods were like, after all.

"The gods are so gracious… Why did they choose the Demon King?"

The Five Great Gods bestowed such immense miracles without cost.

But why did Als and Tu’an simultaneously choose the Demon King, who brought such great calamity and despair to the world?

No matter how much Ludwig thought about it, he couldn't understand.

The gods seemed to be benevolent beings, but from a broader perspective, they seemed to desire even greater calamities.

As many others had, Ludwig felt both gratitude and despair for the power given by the gods without cost.

At Ludwig's words, Rowan quietly looked at him.

"Ludwig, the gods are not beings within our comprehension."

"…”

"They see what we cannot see, and know what we do not know."

Various theories were created within the Five Great Gods' faith to justify Als and Tu’an’s choice of the Demon King.

The gods could not be wrong.

Thus, the logic that the gods' providence would lead to a good outcome for the events unfolding now was a prevalent argument.

Even the wicked actions of the Demon King would ultimately result in goodness.

It didn't mean that the Demon King was a righteous being because he possessed the sacred artifacts.

The logic was that the Demon King's arrogance, too, was part of the gods' plan, and that he would ultimately face ruin.

The Five Great God Religion created numerous arguments to say that the gods were right, and the Demon King was wrong, but in the end, that was the central argument.

Everything was calculated, and the Demon King was merely being used by the gods.

In the end, the Demon King would pay the price for his arrogance and cruelty and face eternal suffering before the gods' judgment after his death.

It was a story of a beneficial outcome for humanity, in the end.

No one knew what it was, but since the gods were great, they must have had a plan, perhaps an irresponsible story.

"Does it mean that all of this is part of the gods' plan? That it will ultimately be beneficial for humanity… Is that what you're saying? Through events like these?"

What could be the good outcome that would be achieved or welcomed through such despair and death? Ludwig could not possibly know.

At Ludwig's resentful words, Rowan tilted her head.

"I wonder?"

“…Pardon?"

"I'm not sure."

Ludwig was taken aback by her somewhat naive attitude.

"I can't presume to know the will of the gods, but isn't it not an impossibility?"

Rowan's words were similar to Ludwig's.

"Ludwig."

Rowan spoke.

"Isn't believing that the gods always pursue goodness an act of daring to judge the gods' will?"

“…What?"

"Do the gods have a reason not to desire humanity's extinction?"

"What are you… saying?"

"The world and humanity are byproducts of the gods."

From the innocent smile of the priestess.

"Both lending power without a price to those byproducts and disposing of them are acts dependent on the will of the gods."

"Yes…? I don't understand what you're saying…"

"It's possible that the gods desire the annihilation of humanity."

"!"

"Isn't it blasphemy to believe that the gods always pursue goodness? No, to believe that the gods always make choices for the sake of humanity?"

"Did the gods ever say that the good they pursue is the same as the good for humans?"

Ludwig realized the obvious truth.

In that situation.

In that environment.

In that reality.

A priestess who still belonged to the Church of Tu'an and Als. She couldn't possibly be in her right mind.

CHAPTER 578

The will of the gods belongs to a realm beyond human comprehension.

The gods see further and wider than we do.

And.

It may be a prejudice or a misconception born from the long history of faith that the gods must necessarily favor humans.

The good as perceived by the gods may be different from that perceived by humans.

If the gods consider the extinction of humanity as good, they may well desire it.

Thus, the gods may desire the destruction of mankind.

Upon hearing Rowan's words, Ludwig could not help but be stunned.

There were believers and priests who had abandoned Tu’an and Als.

However, it wasn't only those who left who changed their minds.

Those who remained also had to change their way of thinking to endure.

They had to revise their mindset to maintain their faith.

"But, if the gods really wanted that… why are they helping people?"

"That's just a hypothesis; it's not the truth."

The will of the gods is unfathomable.

"I just do what I can in my position."

Rowan does her best without knowing what the gods' will is.

If they desire destruction, let it happen.

If this leads to a good outcome, just wait for it.

"If everything is the will of the gods, then such actions are part of that will. So, I'm just fulfilling the role I think I have."

It doesn't mean that anything I do is okay because it is part of the will of the gods.

It means doing the best one can.

She wanders around the refugee camp, purifying, and pouring water into a bottomless barrel.

Her mindset is that of a madwoman, but her actions are no different from those of a saint.

However, there is also the danger of self-justification that anything I do is okay.

The logic that everything I do is part of the gods' will eventually shifts the responsibility for everything I do back to the gods.

Ludwig felt both discomfort and sublimity in the priestess before him.

"I personally hope that all this will lead to a good conclusion, but if not, there's nothing we can do."

She is close to resignation but does not give up on her actions.

If the gods desire destruction, they must accept it without resenting them.

It was a pure belief without a single doubt.

"I… I don't know."

Ludwig could neither understand the gods, nor Rowan, who held such an extreme and pure belief.

Rowan smiled at Ludwig.

"It's a confusing time, so it's natural to feel confused."

The fortunate thing was that Rowan was not a fanatic who would be angry if others did not understand or approve of her beliefs.

"It's cold today. Shall we go back?"

"Yes."

Their tasks for the day were complete.

Somewhere along the way back, Ludwig and Rowan heard the sound of horses' hooves.

It wasn't just one or two, but a group of mounted soldiers.

Ludwig and Rowan pressed themselves against the side of the road to avoid the approaching riders.

Dozens of mounted soldiers approached the refugee camp.

The patrol guards in the area do not ride horses.

Ludwig saw the bloodstains on the horses' manes, the soldiers' armor, and their helmets.

Those were the traces of battle.

People on the streets scurried to hide in the nearby tavern as Rowan observed the scene.

"Those are the extermination squads."

"Ah… they are…?"

"Yes, thanks to them, we no longer have a monster problem. It's quite fortunate."

The job Ludwig had wanted to do—handling the monsters on the outskirts of the Imperial Capital—belonged to the extermination squads. Ludwig wordlessly watched as the squad members, who didn't even glance at the refugee camp, silently

rode past on their horses.

He would have rather been doing that work. There was no need for contemplation when it came to killing monsters. The extermination squads seemed to be distant from the ordinary duties of the guards, only concerning themselves with their specific task.

Even if it wasn't the work of the extermination squad, anything that didn't require contemplation would have been nice. If only he could keep doing work like today.

With such thoughts, Ludwig couldn't help but watch as the extermination squads disappeared from view.

"Shall we go?"

Rowan gently tugged on Ludwig's sleeve.

Rowan and Ludwig returned to the guard post to report the completion of the purification work. It seemed that the quarantine of the plague-stricken area could now be lifted.

However, Ludwig couldn't shake the thought: what good would it do? There were never enough priests, and the plague continued to spread.

Even without the plague, people died from trivial colds due to the harsh cold.

Ludwig thought he could understand Rowan's perspective, just a little.

She went around the refugee district performing purification work and driving out the plague.

She knew better than anyone that her work solved nothing. In her despair, she had to believe that there was meaning in all of this to endure it.

But she couldn't fathom how this despair could lead to any good outcome.

So, she began to think that perhaps the gods had abandoned humanity.

If the gods had forsaken them, she could maintain her faith only by accepting that, too.

Ludwig couldn't help but feel sympathy for Rowan, who seemed like an odd person but might have been transformed by the depth of her despair.

'Could it be because of that…?'

Is that why she asked?

What kind of being the Demon King is?

Whether he truly is an evil being?

She asked about the nature of the Demon King because knowing that might allow her to glean the will of the gods, even just a little.

"Ludwig, would you like to return to the Imperial Capital together? We're headed the same way, after all."

"Ah, yes. If it's alright with you…"

Ludwig felt that the delicate-looking priestess was like a candle flame that could be extinguished by even the smallest winter breeze.

As they left the refugee district and returned to the Imperial Capital, Ludwig realized he hadn't accomplished much today. He had simply walked beside Rowan, watching their surroundings and preparing for any unexpected situations.

Yet, he felt more exhausted than the day before.

The gruesome sights had been the same as yesterday, but his mental fatigue was greater.

The words about the gods potentially wishing for humanity's destruction.

The notion that the belief in the Five Great Gods being on humanity's side could be misguided.

Those words left Ludwig feeling bewildered.

"Will you be going to another district tomorrow?"

"Tomorrow, I'll return to District 17 to check if the plague has truly stopped spreading. After that, I'm scheduled to go to District 15. Then District 6. And after that… I'll have to check. More places will have been added, after all. There's always more work to do."

"Aren't you tired?"

"Priests who can use healing powers are generally distant from the concept of fatigue. Although there's nothing we can do about mental exhaustion, we can't indulge in it when there are people who urgently need our help today, can we?"

"I see."

Even though Rowan didn't mention it, Ludwig couldn't help but notice that she barely got proper sleep.

Although they had left the epidemic zone, the refugee camp was hardly any different.

Despair was visible everywhere.

"The work of a guard. It must be unfamiliar to you."

Unable to lower his head at Rowan's words, Ludwig said, "I suppose my expression… gave it away."

"Yes, you're very different from the other guards."

Having been escorted by guards who treated the refugees like insects, Rowan probably saw Ludwig as an odd person.

"Ludwig."

"Yes, Priestess?"

Rowan looked at Ludwig.

"If it's not too much to ask, could you please protect me again tomorrow?"

“…Pardon?"

Tomorrow, Rowan would be going to another district, so she would have to borrow manpower from a different guard unit.

"You know, the guards… they kill people too easily."

“…I see."

"It's painful to watch."

It wouldn't have been smooth sailing during her visits to the refugee camps so far.

Rowan must have witnessed extreme actions taken by her escort guards in extreme situations.

Ludwig, on the other hand, was obviously inexperienced and reluctant to kill.

He even showed relief at the prospect of escaping with her in case something happened.

Rowan asked for his protection because she knew Ludwig would not take extreme actions.

Ludwig hesitated.

He wanted to nod immediately, but he couldn't be sure if he could really help Rowan.

"I had no problems today, but with this body, I'm not sure if I can protect you when it's really dangerous…”

"You said you were confident."

"…”

"You can also do Magic Body Strengthening, so isn't that enough?"

It's not a fight, just carrying and running, so wouldn't that be fine?

Ludwig couldn't find anything to say in response to Rowan's words.

Manpower was precious, and in a way, Ludwig was precious manpower.

And so was Rowan.

A priestess who purified epidemics, and the task of protecting her.

Regardless of how temporary the solution might be, it was an essential task.

It wasn't fighting dangerous monsters, as Bertus and others worried. The person he was escorting would rather flee if trouble arose.

It wasn't a dangerous task, and there was hardly any room for value judgments.

In short.

It wouldn't be an exaggeration to say that it was the most positive task currently allowed to Ludwig.

He longed for the work of the suppression force because it didn't require any room for doubt.

Similarly, this task was also indispensable for the people and left no room for doubt.

"I'll need the captain's permission, but… I have no reason not to do it."

"I'm so glad, Ludwig."

Looking at Rowan's bright smile, Ludwig awkwardly smiled back.

But.

Today.

They had shared many conversations.

In those words.

Did I ever mention that I can do Magic Body Strengthening?

Ludwig had a small doubt.

CHAPTER 579

After leaving the refugee camp, Rowan headed for the church of Tu’an, located in the outskirts of the Imperial Capital.

"Will you stay there?"

"I prefer to rest at the church closest to the place I have to go the next day, so I don't really have a fixed residence."

As vast as the refugee area was, so was the Imperial Capital. Thus, she traveled around the Imperial Capital without a fixed residence, resting wherever she could find a place affiliated with the Five Great Religions.

"Please come here by nine o'clock at the latest tomorrow. If you're late, I'll leave without you. Got it?"

At Rowan's playful remark, Ludwig scratched the back of his head with an awkward expression.

"Yes, I'll make sure to be there."

Helping Rowan was a temporary measure, but it was absolutely necessary.

Just by being able to help her, Ludwig felt that the burden and pressure had somewhat disappeared.

If he had been smarter, wiser, could he have known what was right?

Facing difficult tasks, Ludwig confronted the limits of his ability to overcome them.

In a way, Rowan was nothing short of salvation for the lost Ludwig.

The Church of Tu’an.

In the church, one could feel an aura of decline.

Perhaps thinking that they could catch something evil, there were no passersby around, and the people guarding the church also seemed fatigued.

Not only that, but the church's stone walls were covered in illegible graffiti and many places were damaged.

The anger and hatred of the people towards the Tu’an faith were evident in the church's decaying state and the graffiti.

Every church of Tu'an and Als must have been like this.

People avoided them, there were hardly any devoted followers, and people even secretly damaged them.

"Pathetic, isn't it?"

"Pardon? Oh…”

"Sometimes, there are people who try to set it on fire."

Graffiti and damage were one thing, but arson attempts?

At that statement, Ludwig couldn't help but be shocked.

"To that extent…?"

"Yes."

Rowan's calm response carried a deep sorrow.

People treated the church of Tu'an as if it were a place of worship for the Demon King.

Ludwig approached the entrance of the church.

The faces of those guarding the door changed.

As if they were tense about something.

Of course, it was not Ludwig himself that made them tense.

The priests' gazes turned to Ludwig's right.

"Your Grace, the Archbishop! You've worked hard today!"

"Yes, you've all done a great job too."

The Archbishop.

At that moment, Ludwig had no choice but to freeze.

"See you tomorrow, Ludwig."

"Wh-What? Ah… Yes, yes!"

After giving Ludwig a slight bow, Rowan entered the church.

Come to think of it, she had said she was a priestess, but she never mentioned her rank.

Ludwig never asked, either. So, it wasn't that Rowan deliberately deceived him, she simply didn't mention what he didn't ask.

He had thought she was just an ordinary priestess.

However.

He finally realized that a priestess who could purify a vast refugee area's epidemic just by offering prayers could not be an ordinary priestess.

Did the fact that the Archbishop wandered the refugee camp alone without the escort of holy knights mean that the Archbishop was a great person?

Or did it mean that the Tu'an Order had declined to the point where it had to be that way?

All day, Ludwig had walked alongside a priestess, never imagining that she would turn out to be none other than the archbishop of the Tu'an Order—an individual he would never have expected to encounter under normal circumstances. For a while, Ludwig was completely dumbstruck upon realizing this.

In front of the archbishop, Ludwig even dared to question why the gods had chosen the demon king.

It was impossible to know if Rowan had shown mercy because of the situation, but under normal circumstances, Ludwig's sacrilege would have been grounds for being dragged away by an inquisitor.

Rowan was not an ordinary priestess, but an archbishop.

She was a priestess of incredibly high standing.

And yet, Ludwig had been a fool.

'An archbishop… How high-ranking is that?'

Though he was surprised to learn that Rowan was of high rank, Ludwig had no idea of the extent of that position.

He knew what research was being conducted at Temple Magic University, having seen it with his own eyes.

It wasn't just about reviving dead mages as liches; they were doing something even greater. They were essentially reviving individuals with half of their former abilities, but without restoring their memories and sense of self.

This was on an entirely different level from liches or death knights.

He relayed what he had discovered to Sarkegaar.

There was no immediate evidence of a connection to the Black Order, and even if there was, he had resolved to accept it. So they decided not to take any action regarding this matter.

If resolving the Gate Incident was the only hope for this world, then anything that could speed up its resolution would be a better hope.

Therefore, he would tacitly allow and ignore the empire's actions.

Though he had no choice but to meet with Bertus directly, the outcome was not unfavorable.

He could not know how this matter and his conversation with Bertus would develop in the future, but this was the best course of action he could think of at the moment.

He did not immediately return to Edina.

Truthfully, right now, Ellen would tearfully and angrily search the entire Temple if he were to disappear.

If she didn't return to the coalition army's camp without him, he would be stuck here.

It was best not to cause a cat disappearance incident that would affect Ellen's mental state.

If there was an urgent matter, he could reluctantly leave Sarkegaar behind as a substitute.

In any case, he had no choice but to remain at the Temple for the time being.

At the banquet hall in the late evening, those who had returned late after taking care of business were having dinner. Though the official dinner time had long passed, preserved food was prepared for latecomers, so they could at least stave off hunger.

Ellen and Heinrich, who had been patrolling the Imperial Capital today as well, seemed to have found nothing unusual. At least the monster problem seemed to be well under control.

From the beginning, there couldn't be a monster problem. The extermination force on the outskirts of the Imperial Capital wasn't simply a patrol or a knight squad—it consisted of resurrected war heroes.

Their actual mission was not to exterminate monsters, but to verify whether they could be properly controlled for deployment in real battles.

It was like using a missile to kill a chicken rather than a knife, so there was nothing for Ellen and Heinrich to do.

And now, Ludwig, who had just returned late from his guard duties.

There was no particular reason to sit separately, so the three of them gathered and ate their late dinner together.

Ellen had hard tack and water.

Heinrich had jerky.

In front of Ludwig lay a piece of hard bread.

Everyone knew that even this much was a luxury, so they tended to eat sparingly.

At this late hour, there weren't many people in the banquet hall.

As a cat, I sat on the table, listening to the conversations they were having. Ellen offered me a piece of dried meat she had prepared, but I didn't put it in my mouth.

I wasn't particularly hungry.

I didn't like to waste food either, just like them.

After tapping my nose a few times, Ellen gave up trying to force me to eat and took a bite of the meat herself.

"Archbishop?"

"Oh, how important is an archbishop?"

Ludwig asked, sitting next to Heinrich after quickly consuming the hard bread and a cup of water upon his return.

What does an archbishop have to do with the guards?

Heinrich chewed on his meat in response to Ludwig's unexpected question.

"Well… there are many cases, you see."

"Many cases?"

"We don't know if the archbishop in question is a rank-based one or an archdiocesan one."

“…Archdiocesan? What is that?"

At Ludwig's question, Heinrich looked at him quietly.

Would Ludwig's brain overload? Or would mine while explaining?

Thinking about it, Heinrich wasn't as slow-witted as Ludwig, but he wasn't a fool either.

Heinrich carefully opened his mouth.

"I don't know the details, but from what I know, an archdiocesan bishop manages a large diocese. However, not all archbishops manage a large diocese. Some are responsible for archdioceses while others have entirely different roles as archbishops. So, even among archbishops, their tasks can vary, and there is a hierarchy."

"…”

At these words, Ludwig looked at Heinrich in silence.

"Um, sorry, but… what's a large diocese?"

"Ah."

It wasn't a matter of understanding.

There was nothing to understand in the first place.

Heinrich's mouth hung open slightly, as if he didn't know where to begin.

"Think of it simply."

Finally, our Ellen stepped in.

"If a bishop manages a few churchs, an archbishop manages dozens of churchs. Not all of them, but you can think of it like that."

"Ah… like a lord?"

"Yes. Think of a bishop as a lord and an archbishop as a great lord. In fact, there are cases where clergy like bishoprics and archbishoprics perform duties similar to those of lords. Of course, the meaning has been lost now."

Not only similar to a lord, but in the case of bishoprics and archbishoprics, they are actually lords.

With Ellen's considerably abridged explanation that bishops are lords and archbishops are great lords, Ludwig found it much easier to understand.

"So, they're really high-ranking priests?"

"Yes, only cardinals and the pope rank above them."

"But what do you mean by a hierarchy among archbishops?"

Heinrich's unnecessary words made Ludwig more curious.

Ellen silently put a piece of hard biscuit in her mouth and chewed it for a while. Then, she took a sip of water and spoke.

"An archbishop who manages all the churchs of the Empire."

"In Serandia, which we just conquered, there must have been an archbishop managing all the churchs since it was a big city."

"Archbishop of the Imperial Capital, Archbishop of Serandia."

"Both are archbishops, but who ranks higher?"

At Ellen's question, Ludwig nodded his head as if he had an aha moment.

"The Archbishop of the Imperial Capital, I suppose?"

"That's right."

After Ellen observed that Ludwig had understood quite accurately, she nodded her head.

"But is there an archbishop managing the entire Imperial Capital?"

“…I don't know since I'm not affiliated with the Holy Knights or the Five Great Churches. However, the Imperial Capital has the most churchs in the continent. So, the dioceses might be more subdivided. There could be multiple archdioceses, and the position of the Archbishop of the Imperial Capital might be altogether different…”

As Ellen tried to explain something, she looked at Ludwig.

"I don't know."

Ellen quietly said so and took a bite of her biscuit.

That's right.

Don't bother explaining.

He won't understand anyway.

All he needs to know is that archbishops are high-ranking, but their ranks are not equal.

However, Ludwig seemed to have more questions.

"Anyway, Cardinal and Pope rank higher than Archbishop, right?"

"Yes."

"Then, what rank does the Holy Knights' Commander hold?"

Ah.

I see, he might wonder about that.

"Higher than Cardinal, lower than Pope."

Ellen answered briefly.

"Originally, the position of the Holy Knights' Commander is ambiguous since it's a

non-existent rank. Technically, it's below the Pope, but in terms of actual power, it surpasses the Pope. So, you could say it's almost on par with the Pope."

"I see…"

"Why did you suddenly bring up the Archbishop?"

It was Heinrich's question, and I had been wondering the same thing.

Why was he curious about this?

Ludwig explained the events of the day.

An epidemic-stricken area, and how he had been assigned to escort a single priestess.

And then, after everything was over, he found out the person he thought was a regular priestess was actually an archbishop.

"An archbishop doing that work personally? And without any Holy Knights escorting her?"

"It must be quite a serious situation."

Both Heinrich and Ellen seemed shocked by the news of the archbishop taking action personally.

Well, given the circumstances, it would be better to distribute the clergy's manpower to refugee camps and rely on the help of the guards for protection.

"It seems like I'll continue to escort her starting from tomorrow."

"That's good."

He had seemed quite confused recently, but his expression brightened, indicating that he found today's events quite rewarding.

It was a task that was needed by the people, and it wasn't dangerous.

And although it wasn't the best thing to say, it was a task that seemingly had no end.

As long as the famine in the Imperial Capital persisted, the epidemic would continue to break out. It was a never-ending cycle.

There had been no issues today, but there was no guarantee that there wouldn't be any in the future.

"However, come to think of it, it might not be that strange."

It was Heinrich's words.

"Not strange, you say?"

"An archbishop moving alone."

"Ah… I've heard it's because there are many tasks that require priests."

"No, I mean there might be many archbishops. So, they might be moving alone."

"Huh?"

"Almost all the places worthy of being called archdioceses have been destroyed, right? So, it's only natural that there would be many archbishops in the allied forces' garrisons, the Holy Knights, and the Imperial Capital."

"It might be possible."

Could one still be called a lord if they lost their territory?

If so, an archbishop who lost their archdiocese to manage could still be called an archbishop.

Heinrich's point was that it might not be strange for a priest of such rank to move alone since many archbishops were gathered in the Imperial Capital, and I found it quite plausible.

High-ranking priests had flocked to the Imperial Capital because there was nowhere safe in the world.

As a result, the number of archbishop-level priests, who were usually hard to come by, had increased.

Most of them served in the allied forces, and those who weren't wandered the streets to purify the epidemic.

In a way, the power of the high-ranking priests was concentrated.

Yet, the situation was still grim as there was a shortage of manpower.

In fact, that was only natural.

There were more survivors concentrated in the Imperial Capital than there were priests gathered there.

Still, an archbishop…

-Meow

"Why?"

This was kind of…

A bit cheap, wasn't it?

CHAPTER 580

After reporting to the 17th Guard Captain, Ludwig was assigned to escort Rowan.

They headed to the 15th district after confirming that the spread of the epidemic in the 17th district had completely stopped.

As Rowan had said, extreme situations didn't happen that often.

At most, twice.

And it wasn't because Rowan, the priestess, had been discovered that caused the chaos, but because Ludwig had encountered bandits and carried Rowan while fleeing.

Once they escaped, and once they were cornered, Ludwig knocked them out with just his left arm and confidently escaped the scene.

The bandits' mistake was approaching Ludwig, who had only one arm, thinking he was an easy target.

Thus, two days had passed since Ludwig began escorting Rowan.

Three days of escort duty.

During that time, there were no major incidents, and since the two had to be together all day due to the long distance they had to travel, they couldn't help but share various stories.

Rowan appeared frail but was quite a cheerful person.

Also, she wasn't someone who flaunted her high position.

She behaved as if there was hardly any formality.

Ludwig, who was quite ignorant of formalities, couldn't help but be grateful to Rowan.

And so, they shared many stories during that time.

"I was in a place called Cielan in the Kingdom of Lucefena. You probably don't know it. I was a bishop there, not an archbishop."

Rowan's response to Ludwig's question about where she was an archbishop.

"So… did you become an archbishop after the Gate incident?"

"With a shortage of people and many casualties, vacant positions must be filled by someone. So, I ended up taking on a role that was beyond my capabilities."

Someone had to fill the vacant positions. That's why Rowan said she was appointed archbishop even though she didn't have the ability.

"Should I have called you… Archbishop?"

"No, just call me normally. And it's better to call me by my name rather than priestess."

Rowan looked at Ludwig and winked.

"You know we have to be careful in many places, right?"

Only then did Ludwig realize that calling her a priestess for the past few days had been quite a risky move.

"Ah… I see. I apologize."

"No, it's fine. Nothing has happened so far."

Rowan pointed to the refugee camp visible beyond the Imperial Capital.

"Let's go, we have a lot to do today."

"Yes, lady priestess… I mean, Rowan."

"You can drop the 'lady.' I'll drop the ‘sir’ too, Ludwig."

Rowan grinned and walked ahead of Ludwig.

Rowan was the bishop of a city in a country that had already disappeared.

After the Gate incident, she somehow survived and made it to the Imperial Capital.

And in a situation where someone had to fill a vacant position, Rowan filled someone's vacant position.

She was appointed archbishop after the Gate incident, not originally an archbishop.

'Was she appointed archbishop while doing this job?'

Ludwig tilted his head and followed Rowan.

It was the third day since Ludwig had been accompanying Archbishop Rowan.

In the refugee camp at the Imperial Capital, there were still many streets that needed purification, and more kept emerging.

And slowly.

Snow was scattering in the sky.

During his first year at the Temple.

Around the time of the group mission in the second semester.

On the day he was eliminated from the group mission and had to wait.

On the first night, I entered the open-air bath with Ellen, who had been eliminated just like me, with only a wall separating us.

Ellen asked me if I liked snow.

Honestly, I hadn't given snow much thought. To be precise, I hadn't had the time to

think about such things.

But I did go to the open-air bath while it was snowing.

There was no reason to do so otherwise.

So, at that time, I replied that I seemed to like snow.

Yes.

I had no particular feelings about snow, but in the end, I thought I liked it.

In the A-class dormitory where Ellen and Heinrich were absent, I was the only one in Ellen's room.

Perched on the windowsill, I gazed at the falling snow outside.

There are many types of snow.

There's sleet, flurries, and heavy snow, and even the blizzard that Liana can summon.

Clearly, I liked snow.

I enjoyed the snowfall with Ellen, and I cherished the memory of building a snowman with Harriet and Ellen, those two girls.

If it were snow, it would be heavy snow.

I loved snow that fell enough to cover the world.

I looked at the snow falling outside from inside the window.

Just imagining the lives swallowed by the falling snow is painful.

The snow falling now is a flurry.

I didn't particularly like that kind of snow because it didn't feel like snow, and it seemed as desolate as a type of wind.

Snow that doesn't accumulate is not snow.

That's what I thought.

But now, I think it's fortunate that the falling snow is a flurry.

If it were accumulating snow, if it were pouring down, many people would suffer as much as the amount of snow that fell.

I hope this snow doesn't accumulate.

It doesn't turn into heavy snow, it doesn't turn into a blizzard.

I stared blankly at the snowy sky outside the window.

Should I call Liana?

Should I ask her to stop the snow in the Imperial Capital?

Not to kill monsters, but to save people.

But if I were to ask her, who gets sicker the more she uses her power, to maintain warm weather throughout the winter of the Imperial Capital, then I would also have to ask her to make sure people don't suffer from the cold because she melted the snow.

It's at least three months from now until winter is completely over.

If she has to use her power for three months straight, Liana will surely go mad once winter is over.

Liana's power is for war. It must be conserved.

It's a war to save someone, but we have to turn a blind eye to someone dying for the sake of war.

The snow falls.

The snowflakes were getting thicker and thicker.

Now, I hate snow.

Soon, the flurries turned into heavy snow and began to fall all over the Imperial Capital.

Fortunately, it was not accompanied by a harsh winter wind.

"It's snowing quite a lot."

"This is serious."

Having just confirmed yesterday that the progress of the epidemic in the 38th district, which they had purified, was completely over, both Ludwig and Rowan sighed.

As the heavy snow fell, both Ludwig and Rowan had snow piled up on their robe shoulders and hoods, turning them white.

Most people on the street were huddled up, shivering in the cold snow.

Looking at the shacks that couldn't even properly block the wind, Rowan's complexion couldn't help but worsen.

"If it stopped after snowing moderately…"

"Many people won't be able to withstand the cold, right?"

Upon hearing Ludwig's worried question, Rowan shook her head as if to say that it wasn't the issue.

"When it snows heavily, the cold isn't the problem; the wooden houses collapse. There were many such incidents last winter."

People were crushed and killed under collapsed houses, Rowan explained. It wasn't the cold caused by the snow that was dangerous, but the very act of snowing itself.

The harshness of nature.

Ludwig resented the accumulating snow, but he didn't know where to direct his resentment.

The two continued walking toward their next destination.

Most of the refugees couldn't hide their resentment as they looked at the sky, while some children were simply enjoying the snow and playing in it.

Because they didn't know any better, Ludwig thought as he observed the scene.

"Before the world turned like this, did you enjoy the snow?"

In the current situation, where snow seemed like a symbol of death, it was an absurd question. Ludwig stared blankly at the heavy snowfall pouring from the sky.

“…I'm not sure."

He couldn't remember if he liked or disliked the snow.

It seemed that all memories from before the Gate Incident had been erased.

As if it had become something meaningless, whether it existed or not, he could hardly remember it now.

As if an immense misfortune and despair had swallowed up everything about him. He was already overwhelmed with just thinking about the things he could do right in front of him.

Ludwig suddenly wondered if Rowan was still someone who could think about those past events.

"I used to enjoy it."

Rowan looked up at the sky and spoke softly.

"Lucefena, where I'm from, was a kingdom in the northern part of the continent, and half the year was winter. So, it was very easy to see snow."

A place where half of the year was winter, Ludwig couldn't fathom what kind of place that would be.

"Didn't you end up disliking the snow then…?"

If you saw snow so often that it became annoying, shouldn't you dislike it? Snow was, in fact, a symbol of extreme cold. Just like how people now feared the snow.

"Well, I don't think there's a reason to dislike it just because it's common."

“…I see."

"Lucefena was a land of winter, and Cielan was located on a high plateau. It was a cold place, and there was a lot of heavy snow. That's where I was born."

Rowan's eyes seemed to gaze far away, as if reminiscing about her long-gone homeland.

"I had countless snowball fights with my friends and made snowmen. I touched snow so much that my hands would freeze and crack, and I was scolded by the priests and healed more times than I could count."

Recalling her childhood, Rowan smiled wistfully.

She had played with the snow until she got frostbite.

"Even after I received my priestly initiation, I had quite a few occasions where I was scolded for having snowball fights with the monastery children, being told it was unbecoming. There was even a time when I made a statue of the goddess out of snow and got an earful from the bishop, telling me not to make such things casually."

Rowan looked quite happy as she spoke.

"After my promotion to bishop, there really weren't any more occasions like that. Well… Lucefena was a cold country, but the cold was never an issue, and Cielan was a particularly cold city, but that wasn't a problem either. The empire was vast, and thanks to the Warp Gate, there were many tourists coming to Cielan, the land of snow.

There was a time, just three years ago.

"Even in the bitter cold, even as heavy snow fell, no matter how difficult the place was to live."

"People could survive anywhere."

"Little did we know then, but I think that three years ago was humanity's last golden age."

"Such days may never come again."

A time when one could simply find beauty in the snow.

Up until just three years ago, humanity could live anywhere, as a distribution network called the Warp Gate connected the entire continent.

But now that everything has been destroyed, those days of the past seem like a lie.

"Now, humanity trembles in fear at the slightest cold, and countless people lose sleep even when a little snow falls from the sky."

Humanity, now diminished, is threatened by even the smallest things.

There was no need to worry about heavy snowfall in big, sturdy houses, but now, people must live in makeshift shacks that collapse with just a little snow.

The cold winter winds pierce through these shacks without even a fireplace.

The golden age has passed, and humanity has much to fear.

"Ludwig."

Rowan looks at Ludwig.

"Do you dislike the snow?"

At that, Ludwig nods slightly.

"Yes… it seems so."

At those words, Rowan smiles sadly.

"Now, so do I."

The two walk down the street.

The makeshift shacks in the refugee village are gradually being covered with a layer of soft snow.

Rowan and Ludwig head to the next district, District 42.

The snow has started to accumulate, and they can hear the sound of their footsteps in the snow.

After reporting to the District 42 guards, the two head to the area of the district where a disease outbreak has occurred.

As they always have, Rowan prays as they walk.

Ludwig does not often take the initiative, which makes him wonder if he is really necessary to Rowan.

Of course, whenever Ludwig says this, Rowan tells him that he is fulfilling his role just by making her feel safe.

The refugee village is a place where people should worry more about robbers than attacks fueled by hatred for priests, especially since people don't know that Rowan is a priestess.

Ludwig keeps an eye out for any unexpected situations, but there is nothing unusual. In fact, due to the snow, people are holed up in their makeshift shacks.

Perhaps about three hours pass, and the accumulated snow reaches their ankles.

“Get out!”

There's a commotion in a corner of the refugee village.

Both Rowan, who was praying, and Ludwig, who was keeping an eye on the situation, cannot help but look in that direction.

“Oh, please save us! We just… we were just…”

As Ludwig watches the people being dragged out of the shack and the unidentified

ornaments hanging from their necks and arms, he can't help but realize what they are.

Different from the ones he had seen before, wooden idols are dragged out onto the street and trampled under the guards' feet.

“We warned you last time, if you bring in these worthless idols again, we'll burn them.”

The five guards look at the people trembling on the ground, as if this is not their first offense.

Ludwig can't help but look at Rowan.

Rowan approaches the scene with a stern expression, heading towards the guards who seem ready to stab the heretics with their spears.

"Wait, who are you?"

As if to warn them not to come any closer, the guards aimed their spears at Rowan and Ludwig.

"I am Priestess Rowan, dispatched for purification work. This man here is my escort, and we have permission from the 42nd Guard Division."

"Ah, my apologies, Priestess. We didn't realize."

As Rowan took out the sacred emblem she had hidden in her clothes, the guards lowered their weapons and showed respect.

"May I ask what is happening here?"

"Ah, well… It's about…”

Rowan's tone was neither aggressive nor threatening.

However, the guard felt an inexplicable pressure from Rowan's calm smile.

Ludwig felt the same way.

As if she was wearing a mask, Rowan's smile was excessively gentle and warm, not fitting the current situation.

"Are they heretics?"

"Yes… Indeed, they are. But, they probably don't know any better. They might not even know what they're praying to…"

The guard, who seemed less cruel than Ludwig's previous commanding officer Sontein, was trying to defend the people he had just been berating for their heretical beliefs, now that a priestess had appeared.

Rowan looked at the people shivering and lying on the snow-covered ground.

She silently stared at the shabby house they were dragged out of.

"May I go inside?"

"Yes? Yes! Of course, please do."

"Lord Ludwig."

Rowan gestured to Ludwig, who was at a loss in this situation.

It seemed like a signal to follow her.

"Everyone else, please come inside as well."

Rowan quietly spoke to the people lying on the ground.

Despite it being the guards' jurisdiction, she spoke as if giving an order.

Inside a shanty in the plague-stricken area.

There were five people praying: one adult man, two elderly people, and two women.

Within the shanty, where it was difficult even to stand properly, Rowan scanned the surroundings, including the blankets.

As if searching for something.

"Hmm…”

In a strange silence, Rowan examined something, cocked her head, stared at a blanket for a while lost in thought, and did not engage in conversation with anyone.

After some time, Rowan picked up a small wooden idol lying in the center of the shanty.

It appeared to be a crude imitation of a human figure carved from wood.

"What prayer were you offering?"

Holding the idol, Rowan asked the trembling group.

Even if priests were despised, their power only mattered when they faced a crowd of civilians.

When the force of authority prevailed, their hatred and resentment held no power.

In response to Rowan's gentle question, the old man shuddered and replied.

"Well, we were praying for the plague to end and for everything to be resolved…”

"To this wooden doll?"

"…”

"What is this wooden doll to you?"

Rowan asked the old man.

"Is this your god? How can this wooden doll solve the plague?"

It seemed that Rowan was genuinely curious.

Her warm smile mixed with the question induced fear not only in the people but also in Ludwig.

"I really don't know. How can this wooden doll…”

Bam!

A golden radiance emanated from Rowan's right hand.

"Do you believe that this can bring forth such miracles? Why?"

For a moment, the golden radiance emitted by the light dispelled the cold, the weakness in their bodies vanished at once, and they felt vitality filling them.

Prayers to an unknown idol.

The miracle of tangible healing and purification.

Rowan looked at the heretics as if to ask why they didn't understand the gap between the two.

"I'm asking you, what is this wooden doll? What does it represent? What do you believe in, and what do you want to achieve?"

Her tone was infinitely gentle, but everyone was afraid.

The old man couldn't even answer, trembling, but someone else spoke up.

"It's… the hero…”

"Excuse me?"

"It's… the hero… right here."

At the trembling young woman's words, not only Ludwig but also Rowan's expression hardened.

The wooden idol, resembling a human figure.

They said it imitated the appearance of the hero, Ellen Artorius.

"The hero… will save us all…”

Rowan slowly nodded her head at the words of the trembling young woman.

"Ah… I see."

Rowan stared silently at the wooden idol.

Ludwig had an ominous feeling that some abyss was swirling in Rowan's gaze.

However, after a brief moment of silence.

Rowan carefully placed the wooden idol back in the center of the room.

"Yes, the hero will save us all."

Numerous heresies were rampant.

However, the Hero Religion couldn't be treated as heresy.

"Even so, how about carving it more nicely in the future to avoid misunderstandings? After all, it's a sculpture that represents the great hero."

Rowan looked at the trembling heretics and smiled warmly.

"The hero is said to be incredibly, incredibly beautiful."

Rowan quietly left the shanty.

CHAPTER 581

Rowan knew that the heretics believed in the Hero Religion, yet she took no action against them.

In reality, Rowan had no right to punish or judge them, so there was no reason for her to do so in the first place.

However, Ludwig had just sensed fear in Rowan's demeanor.

If Rowan thought it necessary, she seemed as if she would kill without hesitation.

Ludwig had been traveling with Rowan for about five days, but this was the first time he had seen such a side of her.

In retrospect, Ludwig had never encountered any heretics while traveling with Rowan.

The Hero's Religion.

As a priest who believed in the Five Great Gods, Rowan would naturally have a lot to think about regarding the Hero's Religion.

The idol representing the hero.

Watching it, Rowan's expression and gaze had clearly changed.

Ludwig could not pinpoint the exact emotion, but he could see that it was far from positive swirling in Rowan's eyes.

"The Hero Religion…"

"…"

"Ludwig, do you think those people we saw earlier were truly believers of the Hero Relligion?"

"They said so themselves…"

"The Hero Religion can serve as an excuse."

Rowan looked at Ludwig.

"Many heretics pretend to follow the Hero Religion to conceal their true beliefs. They wear the mask of the Hero Religion because it's easy to get away with it."

Ludwig could only nod slowly in agreement.

The Hero Religion was left untouched.

That's why they claim to be followers of the Hero Religion in times of crisis, hoping that they might be left alone.

"Do you think those people we saw earlier… were not really followers of the Hero Religion?"

"Well, I don't know. The Hero Religion is divided among its own believers. What does it even mean to be a true follower of the Hero Religion?"

The Hero Religion was not a specific group.

It was dispersed like a folk religion, without a standardized belief system.

They simply believed that Ellen Artorius would save everyone.

Within that, there were dozens, hundreds of variations of derived beliefs.

The Hero Religion was not forbidden.

However, it was definitely heresy, as Ellen was not one of the Five Great Gods.

Of course, going deeper, it was not entirely unrelated, but there were hardly any who knew about that.

Now, there were more people who believed in the Hero Religion than those who believed in the Five Great Gods. That's why the once heretical majority could no longer be considered heretics.

It was impossible to root them out, as they had no substance or core.

Many heretics were killed by the guards, and some of them were believers of the Hero Religion.

But if everyone who believed in the Hero Religion was killed, the refugee camp would be devoid of people.

"Strictly speaking, the roots of the numerous heresies spread throughout the refugee camp might be based on the Hero Religion."

There was no clear definition of what the true Hero Religion was, even if they wore the mask of it.

"But it's ironic, isn't it? The Hero Religion is heresy itself, but what difference does it make if heresy wears a mask?"

It was just a heresy that had grown too large to be considered heresy.

From the perspective of the Five Great Gods, the Hero Religion was an even more uncomfortable belief than the Devil God Cult.

Rowan looked up at the sky and sighed.

"The hero will save everyone…"

She looked at Ludwig and smiled.

"Ludwig, you must have lived with the hero in the temple too, right?"

"…Yes."

The Demon King, and the hero.

Ludwig felt that it was a bizarre and sinister twist of fate that he was able to witness the peculiar and fateful entanglement up close.

The Demon King, despised by all.

The hero, the hope of everyone.

He was one of the few who had watched their once ordinary lives unfold before him.

For quite some time, he had observed the false peace between the Demon King and the hero.

Even now, Ellen had returned to the temple.

If they went back like this, countless people would be eager to catch even a glimpse of Ellen's feet, yet Ludwig would have dinner with her.

He couldn't believe that such a thing was possible for someone as insignificant as himself.

People who wanted to see Ellen's face would carve her image out of a log and pray to it, but Ludwig could share a meal with her and discuss what had happened that day.

Even his questions about archbishops, borne out of ignorance, were calmly answered by Ellen.

The hero as people imagined her.

The real Ellen that Ludwig could see.

The gap between the two was enormous.

"I'm not sure about the Demon King, but what is the hero like?"

"…"

Rowan asked, seemingly curious.

It was obvious that Rowan had no small amount of resentment towards the Hero Religion.

But the Hero Religion and the hero were different things.

Of course, Ludwig knew that people were projecting their expectations onto Ellen, who had nothing to do with the real Ellen. She was not the hero of the Hero Religion, but the real Ellen Artorius.

What kind of person was she?

During the time when the temple was functioning properly, Ludwig had rarely spoken with Ellen.

Even after the Gate Incident, Ellen had gone to extremely dangerous battlefields, so they rarely met.

Thus, it was only when the allied forces were advancing which included the Royal Class garrison that Ludwig occasionally had the opportunity to talk to Ellen or watch her.

Ellen was strong.

Ellen was great.

Ellen was self-sacrificing.

Many words swirled in his head, but Ludwig felt that none of them could describe who Ellen was.

That was a story everyone knew.

The Ellen that Ludwig had seen.

Ellen spent the most time with Reinhardt.

"Ellen is… perhaps… the biggest victim of all of this," Ludwig thought.

Victim.

That was the only way Ludwig could put it.

Ellen spent time with Reinhardt, unknowing of everything.

Strictly speaking, Ludwig thought that Ellen might have loved Reinhardt.

Maybe even now.

But the Demon King had approached Ellen. No, the Demon King had approached

others as well.

After the situation deteriorated, some followed the Demon King, but Ellen did not.

Ellen was betrayed by Reinhardt.

Wasn't that why she was a victim?

Thinking of Ellen's seemingly calm demeanor and the deep sadness in her eyes, Ludwig couldn't help but say so.

"A victim?"

"Yes."

At Rowan's words, Ludwig nodded.

He had no intention of discussing the details, as it would only bring pain. It was Ellen's personal story, and it might also damage people's trust in their hero.

Ludwig had no intention of telling Rowan that the hero might have loved the Demon King.

Just a victim.

All he could say was that she was a victim of it all.

That was the thought.

"Ah…"

Ludwig saw the corner of Rowan's mouth curl up in a smile.

"So, you knew…"

For some reason, Rowan's strange laughter felt eerie to Ludwig.

"…Is there a problem?"

At Ludwig's question, Rowan shook her head.

"No, it's just… Just a thought."

Rowan resumed her prayers and walked the streets, while Ludwig silently guarded her side.

By the time all the purification work was done, the accumulated snow reached their ankles.

"Let's head back. We'll need to come and check again tomorrow…"

Rowan couldn't help but halt her steps before finishing her sentence.

In an alleyway of the refugee camp.

Although they didn't seem particularly strong, there were individuals with clear hostility blocking the path of Rowan and Ludwig.

When Ludwig looked back, another group of refugees was blocking their retreat.

He couldn't tell who they were or why they were blocking the path.

But the hostility was evident.

And he recognized a few faces from earlier.

"Ludwig."

"Yes."

Ludwig immediately understood what Rowan was saying.

He quickly embraced Rowan's waist, as if to snatch her away, and hung her on his side.

"Ah!"

Rowan let out a small scream, as he had grabbed her so tightly.

-Thump!

Wrapped in blue mana, Ludwig's body leaped a distance of about ten meters in an instant, jumping over those who were blocking the path.

Regardless of their intentions in approaching Rowan and Ludwig, it was impossible to follow them as they disappeared like a shot arrow.

"Should we be safe now?"

"Yes, probably…"

Ludwig carefully put down Rowan, who he had been carrying almost like a bag.

"Ouch…"

Rowan groaned as she stretched her waist.

"Uh… I'm sorry. I was too…"

"No, we had no choice."

They had managed to escape the crude encirclement in no time. But there were at least ten people who had surrounded Ludwig and Rowan.

It was challenging to see them as mere robbers. Rowan scratched her cheek as if she were troubled.

"You saw those people earlier, right?"

"Yes… Definitely."

While not all of them, he had seen some who claimed to be hero priests.

It was difficult to consider them reckless.

In the first place, Rowan looked fragile, and Ludwig was even unarmed with only one arm.

It was only natural for them to be more afraid of the armed guards carrying spears than Rowan and Ludwig.

The worst-case scenario that Rowan had always mentioned had just occurred.

They had tried to attack a priestess, and Rowan was an Archbishop-level priestess at that.

Moreover, the heretics had attempted to kill her directly.

"It's not unheard of for heretics to form dangerous factions. But this time, it doesn't seem to be that serious."

"What happens when such a faction forms?"

"Well, who knows? Anyway, the important thing is that it wasn't that this time, right?"

Rowan deliberately changed the subject.

"Let's head back. It's fortunate no one was hurt."

With an attitude as if everything was settled since nothing happened, Rowan led the way, and Ludwig followed her blankly.

When they saw the heretics, they had an air of severity about them, but now, after almost being ambushed, their attitude was as if everything was over.

Ludwig couldn't quite grasp Rowan.

However, in the end, nobody was hurt, and for Ludwig, it was fortunate that everything passed without further incident.

"Wow, Ludwig, you really run well. I'm quite dizzy from watching."

"Ah… well… It's one of my few talents."

At Ludwig's modest response, Rowan smiled softly.

"Really? What other talents do you have?"

"I'm not sure… Other than having a bit more stamina than others…"

"That seems like an understatement, don't you think? Just being able to do Magic Body Strengthening is already an incredible talent."

"Really? Ah…"

"Aren't there many people who despair because they can't do even that?"

Rowan spoke the truth.

Even though Ludwig had lost an arm and couldn't fight properly, ordinary people wouldn't dare to chase after him when he leaped just once and that far.

Ludwig's status as a superhuman, far from ordinary, remained unchanged.

"I thought Ludwig was a humble person, but after spending a few days with him, I don't think that's the case."

"…"

"False humility, without respect, is merely self-deprecation."

Humble doesn't mean thinking oneself as worthless.

Ludwig thinks of himself as worthless. That's why it's not humility.

At Rowan's words, Ludwig could only find himself at a loss for words.

Because he knew it all too well.

"Do you really need to do that?"

"I've lost… precious people."

"I see."

"If I had been a little stronger, a little wiser, a little better…"

Ludwig spoke quietly, his eyes empty.

"If I had been stronger, I wouldn't have lost those who didn't need to be lost… That's all I can think about."

In the end, he could do nothing but blame his own incompetence.

He wanted to die on the battlefield but was driven away because he would only be a burden to others.

"Still, I'm grateful that I can still do something… I think that's a blessing."

Ludwig believed he had found a glimmer of hope amidst resignation.

This job would eventually end, but it was necessary for everyone.

Helping Rowan. The only wise thing he could do.

"So I want to thank you, Priestess."

"Um…"

She tilted her head.

"You do know that priestesses of Tu'an are not allowed to marry or fall in love, right?"

"That's not what I meant…!"

"Oh, you're so easily flustered."

Rowan laughed for a while, watching Ludwig's face turn red and hearing him sputter.

What a strange person.

Ludwig found it difficult to figure out what kind of person Rowan was.

Because of this, Rowan seemed strange to Ludwig.

At first, he thought she was a saint, but then he discovered her twisted belief in the divine. However, she didn't seem like a bad person, as she was trying her best within her fanatical beliefs.

When facing heretics, he was afraid she might cause trouble, but she never did any harm to them.

And she sometimes spoke strange, incomprehensible words.

Ludwig could not figure out what kind of person the priestess before him was.

She seemed genuinely kind, yet insane, and at times appeared sane precisely because she was mad.

A priestess from the cold northern lands.

Ludwig didn't think of himself as smart, but he didn't easily forget what he heard.

As Ellen had said.

The bishop is a lord, and the archbishop is a great lord.

That's not always the case, but generally it is.

Heinrich said.

There may be many archbishops who have taken refuge in the Empire. The ones who have lost the temples they should have governed, now mere shells of their former selves. That's why it might not be unusual for an archbishop-level priest to be wandering the streets.

Rowan said.

She had been a bishop-level priest before the Gate Incident but had taken on a higher position to fill someone's void after the incident.

Now that only a very few lands remain safe, there would be no archbishops fulfilling the role of a great lord.

That meant Rowan was not an archbishop with the same rank as a great lord.

It implied that she had been promoted to the position of archbishop while taking on some other duty rather than governing a territory or an archbishopric.

Was she given the duty of an archbishop because of her work in purifying the disease?

"Rowan."

"Yes, Ludwig?"

"Is this work… all you do as an archbishop?"

"Ah…”

Rowan nodded slowly, as if understanding what Ludwig was asking.

"Well, it's a bit of both."

"A bit of both?"

"Yes."

Rowan calmly walked, exhaling white breaths.

"People keep dying in the Empire."

“…Yes."

"And there are many heretics."

"True."

"In a place where unsavory and ominous events keep occurring, strange things happen more frequently."

Rowan's expression grew darker as she said this.

"You may not have seen it yet, Ludwig, but there are cases where corpses turn into undead."

“…Is it that bad?"

Ludwig felt chills run down his spine at the mention of undead.

"If impure energy is misused, even stranger things can happen. For example, wrongful rituals by heretics or prayers directed towards unknown, possibly non-existent powers."

"Ah…"

"The reason I appeared a bit strange earlier is that I have seen too many odd things while visiting refugee camps."

Rowan was indeed smiling, but she couldn't hide the chilly atmosphere.

Perhaps she was worried about the negative effects that a wrongful ritual might bring.

"At a time when relying on the right power is not enough, praying to an unknown and possibly non-existent power is either meaningless or too dangerous, isn't it?"

"I suppose so…"

"Confirming whether such events are happening is also part of my job. If it's something I can deal with, I handle it."

It was in the same vein as the disease purification work.

She roamed around, finding necessary tasks, and if it was something she could resolve, she did so.

"Lately, there has been a very strange incident, and I am mainly looking into that issue."

"A strange incident?"

"…Ah! We're here."

Before they knew it, they had arrived at the temple of Tu'an where Rowan stayed.

"Ludwig, be careful when you enter. You remember about tomorrow, right?"

"Yes, should I be there by nine o'clock?"

"Um… But could you come a little earlier than usual tomorrow?"

"Is there something special…?"

"No?"

Rowan smiled at Ludwig.

"Let's have tea together before we leave tomorrow. Just the two of us."

Rowan winked at Ludwig and then quickly entered the temple.

What a strange person.

Ludwig couldn't shake off that thought.

He had a strong feeling that she had wanted to say something but stopped herself.

A strange matter.

He felt as if she had cut off the conversation from her side when he tried to ask about it.

And then.

'She said she moves from church to church… '

Though it had only been five days.

Rowan hadn't moved her residence from this shabby church to another church yet.

Ludwig returned to the Temple.

Today, too, no one had been hurt.

Ludwig was satisfied and grateful for just that in this job.

-Pop!

At a warp spot in the Imperial Capital, a group of people and supplies appeared with a brilliant flash of light.

A large-scale transport of personnel and supplies using mass teleportation.

"Here is…"

Louise von Schwarz was able to arrive at the snowy Imperial Capital late at night.

She arrived alone, without a single attendant. Since only she had been granted permission to enter the Temple, she had come alone.

She looked around in the dimly lit, snowfall-covered Empire.

"…?"

Naturally.

Without a single attendant, Louise had no idea where she was in the Capital.

Louise had to go to the Temple.

However, in reality, without an attendant, there was no way she could know the way.

"Why is it snowing like this…"

Moreover, the falling snow limited her visibility.

And so, she unintentionally arrived at the Imperial Palace, which was in the opposite direction of the Temple, instead of heading to the Temple.

CHAPTER 582

Louise von Schwarz had received an unexpected vacation during the winter.

The one person above her, the king and her father, had ordered her to rest.

Throughout the winter, the King of Kernstadt would take over the command of the army.

However, she still had to complete a minimum handover, so it took her quite some time to convey the current situation and important matters of the Kernstadt army.

Once all the handover was complete and she had delegated full authority to the king, it was late at night, a few days after completing the handover, before she could finally arrive at the Imperial Capital through the allied forces' warp spot.

And so, at this moment,

Louise felt as though she understood what it meant for one's head to spin.

For one, it was her first time in the streets of the Imperial Capital, and it was a dark, snowy night.

While she had some business at the Imperial Palace, she had never been granted permission to go towards the temple.

Thus, she was not familiar with the streets of the Imperial Capital, and the snow-covered night streets made it even more difficult to distinguish one place from another.

And right now, Louise was both excited and considerably flustered by this situation.

She had no idea how to deal with her father's anger, but he had initially resigned himself to it.

He had accepted the fact that, because of Heinrich's presence, Louise would eventually have to raise her hand against her siblings like it was a predetermined

future.

What's more, a situation she had never even dreamed of had suddenly arrived.

She was told to go to the temple.

Thus, Louise found this situation to be strangely thrilling, bewildering, exciting, and sad.

She had just come to the Imperial Capital on a whim, only hearing that she should go to the temple to rest.

Louise truly felt like a child again after a long time.

Strictly speaking, she was not particularly good with directions.

Though it would be difficult to say that she had a keen sense of direction, it was the perfect environment for her to get lost.

In fact, she had even ended up arriving at the Imperial Palace, where she had no business, while trying to find the temple.

In the end, she asked the royal guards about the location of the temple, as she was in danger of either facing the morning sun on the streets or becoming a snowman amidst the heavy snowfall.

"Here is the north side of the capital, and the temple is located on the south side."

"Ah…?"

Her mistake was not merely taking the wrong path, but going in the completely opposite direction.

Eventually, she trudged her way towards the southern side of the capital.

First, she had to cross the river to find the temple.

The famous pride of the Imperial Capital, the magic train, had stopped running long ago, so she couldn't take it.

"Even if it was running… I might have gotten more lost…”

Louise had never ridden the magic train before. She had only heard of it and seen it from a distance a few times as it made strange noises while moving when she arrived at the Imperial Capital.

Anyway, this was Louise's first-ever experience of trying to find her way alone.

Feeling like a lost child, she vaguely walked towards the south side of the Imperial Capital.

As long as she could find the right direction, she would be able to find her way through the snowstorm.

The problem was just that.

Connecting the north and south of the Imperial Capital were more than ten large bridges.

She had to cross one of those bridges to reach the south side.

"…”

However, she couldn't see anything due to the snow, so she decided to descend to the riverside promenade of Great River Irene.

In front of her eyes, she could see the frozen Great River Irene, covered in a thick layer of snow due to the winter cold.

Of course, the frozen river could be crossed on foot.

Was there any need to find a bridge?

She could just walk across the river, right? Why bother?

'As long as I can cross it… '

Instead of searching for a bridge, Louise stepped onto the frozen river.

Unexpectedly, Louise began her midnight crossing of the great river.

-Crunch, crunch-

The sound of the princess of Schwarz stepping on the snow echoed.

Louise stumbled a few times as she crossed the frozen Great River Irene.

-Thud!

"…”

Even with her master-class balance, slipping on a snow-covered ice sheet was inevitable if she didn't stay focused.

Louise stood up from her fall, dusting the snow off her bottom and glanced around, wondering if anyone had seen her.

There was no one around to see her fall in the middle of the snow-covered ice sheet. Hence, no one had seen her.

But still, with a slightly flushed face, Louise walked briskly, as if she were trying to run away.

Naturally, she fell a few more times.

After crossing the frozen river, Louise arrived on the streets south of the great river.

The temple and the imperial palace were buildings that could be seen from anywhere in the city, as they were located on slightly elevated grounds. It was no wonder they were called the landmarks of the Imperial Capital.

However, she couldn't see the temple or the imperial palace due to the falling snow.

Louise walked for a while.

She asked people in the sparsely populated streets where the temple was, as the snowstorm had made it difficult to find her way.

"Go that way, just head in that direction."

"Is it… far from here…?"

Unable to be outright informal or use an imperative tone, Louise could only manage an awkwardly phrased question.

"Um… You'll have to walk quite a bit."

After providing directions, the person hurried off on their own way.

Louise found her situation amusing, as she seemed like a lost child. The title of princess and heir to the number one kingdom felt like a distant dream.

Of course, besides that, she was a master-class swordmaster, but that skill was of no help in finding her way.

Still, she couldn't help but feel excited.

It was the temple, a place she had been forbidden to even look at from afar.

The moment she could see the place where her son had grown up was drawing near, and that alone made Louise's heart race.

Of course, Imperial Capital was in a terrible state, and the atmosphere could be felt everywhere.

The snowy night streets might have been beautiful, but the city was filled with an air of despair and death.

Had she visited Imperial Capital in better times, she might have felt envy, but now it was a city of death.

The few pedestrians she saw huddled as they moved along the streets, and the accumulating snow seemed to be slowly smothering the city to death.

The situation in the capital of Kernstadt was no different.

In reality, no matter where she went, the environment would undoubtedly be worse than Imperial Capital, and yet, the fact that Imperial Capital still maintained its appearance might have been enough to consider it an incredible city.

And then.

Louise suddenly heard the sound of approaching footsteps from beyond.

Louise stepped aside quickly, frightened by the group of people that passed by her on the road.

'…What?'

Louise instinctively knew from their footsteps and behavior that they were different.

Those who had received combat training were different from the start, not just in their footfalls, but even in their presence.

They disappeared somewhere without so much as glancing at Louise.

She didn't know what could be so urgent, but it was enough to prevent her from daring to ask for directions.

What could cause these professional fighters to move with such serious expressions in the middle of the night?

Louise snapped out of her thoughts.

Her priority now was to find the temple.

She couldn't afford to stand still, or she'd end up a real snowman.

As Louise walked in the direction of the temple, the night grew darker and the snow piled up even more.

This inevitably led to a problem.

'Where on earth… am I?'

It was inevitable that Louise would become lost.

She knew the temple was near, but there was no one left to ask for directions.

'I know I'm close, though… '

Louise walked aimlessly in the direction she had heard the temple was.

After a while, she finally spotted something beyond the falling snow.

'A light?'

It flickered like a blue flame.

'What's that?'

She was bound to get lost and keep going in circles at this rate.

Soon enough, Louise couldn't help but realize what the approaching blue light was.

It was a person.

A person who had activated Magic Body Strengthening.

Someone wrapped in the blue flames of mana, which strengthened their physical body, was approaching.

They were not alone, as someone else was with them, pulling something.

The approaching person was pulling something that looked like a cart.

"Is this the right place?"

"Ah, thank you. We made it. Put it here."

The figure went into what seemed like a storage area in the darkness, pulling the cart.

"I would have been in big trouble without you."

"No, I was heading this way anyway. And please, be careful with your back."

Louise watched the scene from a distance.

The young man pulling the cart, and the old man.

It was clear that the young man was helping the elder.

However, Louise couldn't help but notice something else about the young man, besides his ability to do Magic Body Strengthening.

"I want to repay you, but I'm not in good shape either."

The young man's right sleeve was loose.

"No! It's okay. I'm fine, really."

Louise stayed nearby until the back-and-forth between the old man offering repayment and the young man refusing ended.

After the old man went into the house, the young man turned around and inevitably locked eyes with Louise, who was watching him.

"Do you need something from me…? Before that… Are you okay…?"

"Um… Uh…"

Louise von Schwarz.

The princess of the Schwarz royal family spoke with an unwittingly pitiful expression.

"Can you… show me the way to… the temple?"

She didn't know much about him, but he was someone who didn't hesitate to help others despite not being in the best shape himself.

And right now, Louise desperately needed that kind of help.

The young man smiled brightly upon hearing her request.

"Oh, I have to go there too. Let's go together."

"Ah, yes… Thank you!"

Louise unknowingly hopped in place.

Thanks to Ludwig's guidance, Louise was able to reach the temple quickly.

Upon arrival, she couldn't help but wonder why she had struggled to find the way.

Of course, both Ludwig and Louise had turned into snowmen due to the falling snow.

Louise was grateful to the heavens for the young man who appeared just in time, a temple student who could even do Magic Body Strengthening.

However, that was not the end of it.

The temple was not a building but a whole area.

As soon as they passed the entrance gate, Louise was dumbfounded by the temple's snow-covered landscape and vast grounds.

She did receive guidance from a temple student.

But this student would go their own way, and then she would be lost again. While she could get directions, Louise was half-convinced that she would inevitably get lost along the way.

Lost outside the temple would only become lost inside the temple.

Should she grab one of the temple guards?

Louise's mind raced.

Seeing Louise's pale face, Ludwig smiled as if he knew what she was thinking.

"The inside of the temple is quite vast as well. Where are you headed? I'll guide you to your destination."

"Can I really… really accept your help?"

Though her attitude was polite, her face betrayed her joy and desperation.

"Yes."

It was amazing that someone so in need of help themselves did not hesitate to help others.

"I need to go to a place called the Royal Class Dormitory… Do you know where that is?"

"…?"

The young man tilted his head at her question.

"You don't know? Well, it can't be helped…"

"No, it's just that it's in the same direction I'm going… I was just surprised."

"…?"

"Let's go. I'll guide you there."

The person she had asked for directions also had the same destination.

The young man in front of her was neither a teacher nor a guard. So, he must be a student.

Only then did Louise become aware of the young man's empty right sleeve, which she had consciously tried not to ask or look at.

Louise knew about the incident that had happened to her son's friends as well.

The dead classmates.

And the stories of the injured classmates.

"Is your name… Ludwig… by any chance?"

"How do you know my name?"

A friend of her son!

"I'm Heinrich's mo…!"

Louise, too excited, almost misspoke and bit her tongue.

"!!!"

"Are… Are you alright?"

She had bitten so hard that she could only taste the metallic bitterness in her mouth.

Ludwig led the way, and Louise followed.

"I had no idea you were the princess… I apologize. No, I mean, Commander…"

Realizing that Louise was Heinrich's sister and the military commander of Kernstadt, Ludwig was flustered. He had heard about Louise, but this was the first time he had seen her face since he had never had any dealings with the Kernstadt army.

Louise vigorously shook her head in response to Ludwig's words.

"No, no, it's fine. There's no need for apologies. I'm the one who's grateful. You're a friend of Heinrich's…"

Finding out that the person who appeared just in time was not only a temple student but also her son's friend, Louise's heart soared even higher.

Louise quietly watched Ludwig's back.

His right sleeve flapped desolately in the wind.

Louise could not witness Heinrich's growth firsthand.

However, through reports, she had learned about Heinrich's school at the temple, and how he was living.

Heinrich's classmates in the Royal Class.

Thus, Louise inevitably came to know about Ludwig, and after the war began, she

became even more acquainted with him.

Ludwig.

Royal Class second-year student, B-11. Technically, a stone seat with his talent being physical strength.

His talent was simple, but he possessed an extraordinary aptitude to grasp Magic Body Strengthening even before learning them.

Of course, there were three more cases like this among the Royal Class second-year students, but two of them were the Demon King and the Hero. It was disrespectful to even compare them.

If it hadn't been for the war, he might have risen to the Master Class before graduating from the Royal Class.

But the war took Ludwig's arm.

Louise could see resignation in Ludwig's eyes, and though she couldn't be sure, she thought he might still be able to fight if he continued training and practicing in that state.

For some reason, she knew of Ludwig's despair when she saw him sitting there, desolate like he had lost everything on a snowy night when the blizzard blew.

War kept taking something from someone.

"By the way, about the carriage earlier…?"

Louise met Ludwig for the first time today.

He had lost his arm, withdrawn from the battlefield, and returned to the temple.

However, on this snowy day, she saw him pulling the baggage cart of an old man she didn't know on the street.

"Ah, he slipped on the snow and seemed to have hurt his waist. So, I took him to his house…"

"I see…”

Louise smiled as she watched Ludwig scratch his head with an awkward grin.

It was a rule that anyone's mood would improve when they saw someone with a good heart, especially if they themselves had been the beneficiary of that kindness.

And so.

Louise found Ludwig's empty right sleeve all the more pitiful and heartrending.

Ludwig was the type who couldn't turn away from an old man groaning and fallen on the snowy path.

He used his own time and strength to help pull the old man's cart to his house.

Louise didn't know the details of how Ludwig had lost his arm, but she had some idea.

She had received a report that he lost his arm while trying to save a friend in danger.

In the end, his inability to turn away from someone in need had led him to lose his arm in these cruel times.

Louise couldn't help but feel the brutal truth that, in this era, a caring heart becomes a weakness as she looked at Ludwig's empty sleeve.

"It's a sad time."

At Louise's sudden remark, Ludwig quietly stared at her.

“…Yes, it is."

"But even in such times…”

Louise exhaled a white breath in the falling snow.

"Let's try our best to live."

"…”

"Let's try our best to survive."

In a world that only takes things away, you cannot simply accept being robbed.

At Louise's unexpected words, Ludwig quietly looked at her.

"Yes, we must."

Ludwig smiled, and so did Louise.

What's this woman doing here?

Why did she come here?

"S… Sister?"

Heinrich's face paled as he saw the unexpected visitor, jumping up from his seat. Startled, Ellen, who had been sitting by the window stroking me, quickly hopped down.

Louise von Schwarz.

An unexpected person appeared in this place.

"I also plan to rest at the temple during the winter."

"You too…?"

"Yes."

Louise spoke stiffly to Heinrich, as usual.

No, couldn't you explain a little more?

Regardless of whether Heinrich was taken aback or not, Louise looked at Ellen.

"It's not our first meeting, but I think it's the first time we've seen each other like this…"

"Hello."

Instead of greeting her as a princess and military commander of Kernstadt, Ellen bowed her head slightly as if to greet a friend's older sister.

Next, Louise looked at me, sitting quietly on the windowsill.

"Is this that cat?"

Did she know about the cat that appeared at the royal class garrison? Louise didn't seem too shocked or surprised at the sight of the black cat.

"Yes."

Ellen held me up to Louise as if inviting her to touch me.

What is this?

Are you treating me as a means to talk to strangers now?

Well, that is convenient.

Louise absentmindedly stared at the presented cat (me) and then gently stroked my head. It felt like she did it out of politeness.

"…"

"…"

As Louise stroked me a few times, Ellen stared at her.

Not just staring, but intensely gazing.

How is it?

How's our baby?

Tell me quickly.

Tell me it's cute.

Her desire was blatantly apparent in her eyes.

Louise seemed slightly embarrassed by Ellen's gaze.

"Um… It's, it's cute…”

"Right?"

Ellen, who was reluctantly acknowledged, vigorously tickled my head.

Louise's expression became quite peculiar as she watched Ellen.

Although they were not strangers, they had never had a conversation before, so Louise had no idea what kind of person Ellen was.

But a hero who shows off a cat?

Was she disappointed or did she think it was human-like?

Regardless of Ellen's behavior, Heinrich was still in a half-panic state.

"Sister… What's going on…?"

"I was told to stay in room A-1. Where is that?"

Anyway, why is this person here?

The temple is not in a situation where anyone can be admitted right now, and Louise von Schwarz is definitely not just anyone.

Bertus must have granted her access.

What does it mean that Louise was allowed into the temple?

Louise was granted permission to stay in room A-1 of the second-year dormitory.

Ironically, that room was once used by the emperor during his time at the temple.

In exchange for the King of Kernstadt taking over military command during the winter, Louise was to spend a long vacation at the temple.

Heinrich was dumbfounded by this unexpected situation, while Louise looked around curiously.

"This place is the temple…"

Whether comparing it to Kernstadt's Academy or feeling a completely different sentiment, Louise seemed quite excited, even with her stern expression.

Heinrich, offering to guide her around the royal class dormitory, disappeared with Louise somewhere. Meanwhile, Ellen was staring at the snow falling gently outside the window.

CHAPTER 583

The day after Louise von Schwarz arrived at the temple.

There weren't many people in the Royal Class dormitory in the first place, and Louise was the commander of the Kernstadt army.

Thus, some of those who recognized her seemed slightly tense, but it didn't get noisy.

Louise found it intriguing that she was at the temple, whether people recognized her or not.

Breakfast time.

“…You were patrolling the area?"

"Yes, sister."

"Didn't I tell you to rest?"

Louise's expression slightly stiffened.

"I'm sorry…”

"I didn't mean to hear that."

Just watching the interaction between the two made one feel awkward.

The tense atmosphere between them was almost unbearable for those who knew them well!

"Anyway… there was no significant issue. The surroundings of the Imperial Capital seem to be quite safe. We didn't even catch a glimpse of any monsters. Right, Ellen?"

At Heinrich's request for support, Ellen, who had been quietly tearing her bread, nodded.

"Yes, it seems like there's no monster problem. I don't think there's much point in patrolling anymore."

The two had been tirelessly active since returning to the temple, but they couldn't even draw their swords for combat. It seemed it was time for them to rest.

However, as they looked out the banquet hall window at the snow, the expressions of both Heinrich and Ellen darkened.

Following hunger and cold, the accumulating snow was a major issue.

The cause of all these issues was the gate incident and the monsters, but now the monsters had become a secondary problem. Louise, after exchanging various stories, glanced at Ludwig who was eating.

"By the way, Ludwig, thank you for yesterday."

"Uh? Oh… no, Commander, it wasn't a big deal."

What is she talking about?

What could Louise be thankful to Ludwig for?

Feeling Heinrich's gaze, Louise seemed slightly taken aback.

She had a look that said she shouldn't have mentioned it.

"He… guided me on the way yesterday."

"Guided you…?"

"Yesterday when I arrived, it was snowing so heavily…"

Louise's face turned slightly red.

Don't tell me…

"Did you… get lost?"

"…Yes."

What the…

Why is this lady so cute?

Initially, she didn't even look like a lady because she was a master-class swordsman.

When I think about it, Louise von Schwarz arrived at the temple very late yesterday.

Ellen and Heinrich were in the lobby, unable to sleep due to the snow, but it was later than their usual bedtime.

She didn't arrive late, but had wandered off the Imperial Capital?

The heavy snowfall made it an unavoidable situation.

A princess getting lost and wandering in the snow.

"If I hadn't met Ludwig in time… I would have wandered even more…"

She had gotten lost and met Ludwig, who guided her to the temple.

No, when you think about it, even after finding the temple would have been a problem.

The temple's interior is extremely vast.

She might have struggled to find the Royal Class dormitory even after finding the temple.

If she hadn't encountered Ludwig by chance, she might have spent the whole night outside.

"Ludwig, were you busy yesterday? You came late, it seems."

Heinrich, who seemed to have sensed my curiosity, asked Ludwig, who was in the middle of his meal.

"It wasn't that I was busy with work… I finished on time, but on my way back… I came across someone who needed help, so I got a bit delayed helping them."

"Typical of you…"

"Heh…"

They say old habits die hard.

In the end, it led to finding the lost princess, so I guess it was a good thing.

Meanwhile, Ludwig's expression seemed to be gradually improving.

It appeared that he was realizing he could still do meaningful work through the purification process.

His wound wouldn't heal completely, but it seemed he would find a way to overcome it, and he was in the process of doing so.

Thanks to Ellen forcibly bringing me to the temple, not only was information gathered, but it was also a relief to see Ludwig getting better.

"Huh?"

-Meow

"Hmm."

As I sat on her knees, Ellen gently stroked my back.

This is…

Quite comfortable…

If it weren't for the Gate incident, I might have been content living as a cat for the rest of my life…

Of course, I'd have to choose an owner as wisely as I did.

Honestly, I think even the blockhead likes my cat form…

Heinrich asked Ludwig, "Are you going out for purification work with that priestess again today?"

"Yes, she asked me to come early today, so I'm leaving soon. There's a lot of snow as well."

"Purification work…?"

Louise tilted her head as if she didn't understand.

"There's an epidemic spreading in the Imperial Capital, so I'm in charge of escorting a priestess who's purifying the disease."

At those words, Louise's eyes widened.

"That's a good deed."

"No, not really. I don't actually do much. Most of the time, I just walk beside her and that's it…"

"Even so, it's a good thing, isn't it?"

"Well… Thank you."

Louise nodded quietly, as if she found Ludwig's efforts to do something despite his condition admirable. It also seemed to make her feel even more pity for him.

That lady seems to have already reached the maximum level of affection for Ludwig.

Well… If someone dislikes a person who's only ever kind, then that person is the problem.

And I had been unfairly harsh to Ludwig.

Yes, I am the problem.

When I think about it, everything in the world is my fault, so I am the problem…

Suddenly, I feel depressed…

Louise stared intently at Ludwig's retreating figure as he left the banquet hall.

"He's a good kid."

It seemed that Louise was relieved to see such a kind-hearted person among Heinrich's friends.

And she couldn't help but feel pity for the reality of him losing an arm like that.

"Yes, he is…"

Heinrich showed a bitter smile at Louise's words.

Both Ellen and Heinrich had confirmed that the outskirts of the Imperial Capital were safe, so there was no need to patrol them anymore.

And due to Louise's arrival at the temple, Heinrich couldn't leave even if he wanted to.

After breakfast, Louise and Heinrich stepped outside the Royal Class dormitory.

There was no intention of patrolling the outskirts anymore. They had seen with their own eyes that the defenses were well in place for several days already.

The reason Heinrich left the dormitory was to show Louise around the temple.

Even the usually stoic mother was visibly excited, and even the not-so-perceptive Heinrich could tell.

However, there was a problem.

"My, there's so much… snow."

"Indeed…"

The snow that had started falling since yesterday had turned the entire world white, leaving nothing but an endless expanse of white all around them.

Fortunately, the snow had been cleared enough so that it wasn't too difficult to walk around, even though it continued to fall.

"The outside world must be in chaos."

"Most likely."

Just like everyone else, Heinrich and Louise could not find any joy in this snow. To them, it felt like a terrible curse falling from the sky.

Heinrich seemed to have an idea and looked at Louise.

"Shall we try melting the snow?"

"With your power?"

"Yes, I've never used it this way before, but… I think it's worth a try."

"Hmm… Give it a shot, then."

"Alright."

Heinrich began to focus his power.

"If it works, we could even melt the snow on the Imperial Capital instead of just patrolling, don't you think?"

Heinrich wore a proud smile as if he was thinking about clearing the snow on the Imperial Capital using his power.

"Well… Give it a try, for now."

Louise decided to watch Heinrich's attempt silently.

-Krrrrrr!

Soon, she could see a bright red, boiling sphere of flame high in the sky.

"Are you planning to summon the sun or something?"

"Well, if I were to do that, it would be disastrous, but for now…"

The blazing flames emitted an intense radiance in every direction, and the heat could even be felt on their skin.

A roaring sphere of fire burned in the sky, melting the piled snow on the ground.

Naturally.

-Plop, plop.

"…"

"…"

The falling snow turned into rain and began to pour down from the sky.

Inevitably, both of them were drenched in rain instead of snow in the middle of winter.

Their clothes were soaked through in an instant.

"Ah, this wasn't…"

Heinrich quickly extinguished the blazing sphere of fire in the sky, his face flushed with embarrassment.

Louise let out a deep sigh.

"I knew this would happen."

"Did… did you?"

"If the snow melts and evaporates instantly from such intense heat, that method might work. But exposing people to that heat would be dangerous. No, the risk of fire would be the main concern. But if you melt the snow this clumsily, the whole street will turn into an ice rink."

Louise thought that Heinrich's grand plan was meaningless, but she decided to let him try it out for himself rather than explaining it to him.

"…I'm sorry. We're just soaking wet now."

Heinrich's face grew even redder with embarrassment, realizing what he had done after actually attempting something he should have known better than to try.

"I wish you would think more deeply before acting."

"Yes…"

"Still…"

Louise looked at Heinrich and smiled.

"Your heart is in the right place."

"Excuse me…?"

Although his attempt was a failure and his method held no meaning, he tried it out of his desire to help people.

"That alone might be enough."

Louise added with a smile.

Caught off guard by her sudden words, Heinrich could only stare blankly.

"Th-thank you, sister…"

Seeing Ludwig must have affected Louise's emotions, and she couldn't help but feel happy seeing a similar side in Heinrich.

Of course.

Having spoken of something she normally wouldn't, Louise found herself as pale as Heinrich.

And that wasn't the only problem.

Naturally, the two couldn't help but feel the intense cold in the freezing winter air.

For Louise, it wasn't an issue, but for Heinrich, it was a problem.

Seeing Heinrich's lips turning purple, Louise sighed.

"…Let's change our clothes first."

“…Yes."

They had no choice but to return immediately after their walk.

After changing into different clothes, Heinrich and Louise set out for a walk around the temple.

"Younger brother, there aren't as many people in the temple as there used to be, right?"

"Since the school is not operating, there are probably only a tenth of the usual number of people? No, even less than that."

"If there are so few people in the temple that the snow can be cleared, we might not need to worry too much about the outside."

"That would be nice."

Louise and Heinrich walked around the temple.

"Do you know about the temple's education?"

"I do."

There is an academy in Kernstadt, and in fact, the Kernstadt Academy had adopted quite a bit of the temple's approach.

From the separate common and specialized education programs to educating children from a very young age and including students from all social classes without discrimination.

"That's the building where we had common education classes."

"Ah… I see."

Louise looked at the snow-white building where the classrooms were.

"That was the swimming pool… and over there was where we did physical training…”

"Right."

Heinrich guided Louise through various parts of the temple, explaining everything.

The classroom building where they had Royal Class lessons, the building where they had supernatural ability classes, the places where they trained in mana sensitivity, and so on.

And not just the Royal Class, but Louise was also taken to the elementary and middle schools Heinrich attended when he was younger.

"This is Main Street. Now the shops are closed, but the temple students used to gather here to go to restaurants or cafes. Almost all of the students came here unless they went out to the main street on weekends."

"It's a very wide street."

"That's right. There were over a hundred thousand students, and this was the street where they mainly gathered. And since students from all over the continent gathered here, you could also taste local cuisine from many places. Well… I didn't particularly like it."

"I see."

Aside from the guards who were clearing snow, passersby were extremely rare, but this space once bustled with countless students.

People from all over the continent gathered here, bringing their cultures with them.

Main Street was not an educational site, but it symbolized the success and prosperity of the temple.

However, now there was not a single open store on the snowy street.

Louise was familiar with all these places in her mind.

The number of students, Main Street, the other schools Heinrich attended.

She knew them in her head, but they were places and scenes she had never seen before.

"You spent your whole life in a place like this."

"Yes."

Louise softly spoke those words, and Heinrich nodded.

"I don't know if it's rude to say this to you… but the temple is a good place."

"You don't have to be considerate. Don't you think I know that the Kernstadt Academy is not as good as the temple?"

Louise quietly looked at the snowy scenery of the temple.

The Academy of Kernstadt was never meant to rival the size of Temple, nor could it. Seeing it with her own eyes, she realized that only an empire could have accomplished such a feat.

Although the Academy of Kernstadt was modeled after Temple, it could not secure the same scale.

First of all, there was no reason to choose the Kernstadt Academy when Temple, the greatest educational institution on the continent, was available. Most students enrolled in Temple came from wealthy families. They had no reason to attend a second-tier academy like Kernstadt.

The Kernstadt Academy did provide tuition assistance, but if they were to fully fund their students like Temple did, the nation itself would falter.

As a result, the number of schools and their scale were inevitably smaller.

Louise was not unaware of this fact, so she did not think that Heinrich was belittling the Kernstadt Academy when he said this.

"No, sister, I did not mean it that way."

As they stood face to face on Main Street, Heinrich spoke softly.

"I'm saying that I have lived a good life in a good place."

"Ah…"

Louise suddenly felt as if the air had been sucked out of her lungs.

"It wasn't exactly happiness, but neither was it misery. Rather, I lived among good people in a good place."

"…"

"So, you don't have to make that face."

Only then did Louise realize the expression she had been wearing.

Heinrich had passed through countless places, schools, dormitories, and streets, but Louise had not been able to witness any of it, let alone be with him. She felt immense guilt for having lived her entire life ignorant of the truth about her son.

That's why she couldn't express her appreciation for each place they visited.

With her guilt unresolved and only growing deeper, Louise's expression remained stiff throughout.

Her joy at arriving at Temple was short-lived.

In the end, she felt regret, sorrow, and ultimately guilt for not having been able to witness those moments. As a result, Louise's mood only sank further.

Temple is a good place, and I lived in such a wonderful place.

So, you don't have to feel sorry for me.

Louise couldn't tell if she even deserved to hear those words.

She had never watched over him, cared for him, or even had a proper conversation with him.

Even now that she knew the truth, they hadn't had a proper conversation.

For fear that someone might overhear them, she still called her son the youngest, and he called her "sister."

"Thank you… for growing up well."

"Oh, if you think that way… thank you."

Louise could only resent herself for not being able to say more.

Even if her country's power was intact, Louise could see with her own eyes that Kernstadt could never catch up with Temple.

Fortunately.

If Temple was a good place where her son could grow up like this, then it was fortunate that Kernstadt could not compete with Temple.

Living in a good place, among good people.

What a relief that must be.

However, as Louise thought this and was moved, she couldn't help but let out a bitter laugh.

Living among good people.

What a terrible lie that was.

Louise smiled bitterly.

"Living in Temple with the Demon King and claiming to have been among good people… Do you think lying will comfort me? Even so… thank you for saying that."

"Huh? Ah…”

Her son must have been one of the most unfortunate people in the world, easily among the top ten.

Despite this, to comfort her, he lied. That was the only way Louise could understand it.

However, upon hearing her words, Heinrich became silent, as if he had received a great shock.

Louise regretted her loose tongue as she looked at her son, who stared at her, wide-

eyed.

Had she carelessly mentioned the Demon King?

It was clear that she had said something unnecessary.

He might feel guilty for not having known anything while he was with the Demon King and for not having prevented all this.

"My youngest, I just meant…"

"Sister."

Feeling an inexplicable tightening in her chest, Louise nodded in confusion.

"Yes. I'm listening."

In Heinrich's terrifyingly stern expression, Louise felt a kind of fear she had never experienced in her life.

Heinrich's face hardened menacingly.

He was contemplating.

She couldn't tell what he was thinking, but he stared at her in silence, as if searching for the right words.

Would she be able to bear the resentment in the words she was about to hear?

Feeling suffocated by the intense pressure, Louise waited for the words to come from Heinrich's mouth.

After a long silence, when the snow that had accumulated on his shoulders seemed to stop falling, he finally spoke.

"All this time, I've been debating whether or not to tell you, Sister… But I think you need to know."

"I need to know… what?"

"Yes."

The words that came from her son's mouth were neither of resentment nor of expressing sorrow.

Heinrich slowly opened his mouth, his expression still stern.

"Actually… before my brothers tried to kill me… the Demon King visited me."

"!"

CHAPTER 584

Heinrich wore a determined expression, while Louise seemed to have lost her soul.

It was only natural. The cause of all this chaos and the one who deserved the hatred of everyone in the world—the Demon King—had secretly visited his son.

And the son had not told anyone about it, not even herself.

Heinrich explained everything from the beginning.

Before he learned that he was a bastard, he received an anonymous letter when he was struggling with the hatred of his brothers and the ignorance of the truth.

"The letter said… my brothers were planning to kill me."

"!"

"They seemed to know… that I was a bastard. I don't know how they knew…"

Of course, Heinrich thought the letter was a prank and didn't believe it. However, he later confirmed the truth about being a bastard through the mouths of his brothers, who were, in fact, his uncles.

"The Demon King appeared that day. It seemed as if he had been watching me from somewhere all along."

"The Demon King… came in person…?"

"Yes, he revealed himself without a doubt."

The Demon King made a proposal to Heinrich.

If he wanted to survive, he should follow him.

If he stayed there, he would either be killed or would have no choice but to want to kill his brothers.

"And… he said he would tell me everything if I followed him. What had happened until now. What I could do in the future. What my role would be in all of this…"

The more Louise heard, the more she felt the hairs on her body stand on end.

The Demon King had been extracting information from the allied forces without her knowing, and her son was even being monitored by him.

Was this what it felt like to have the blood drained from your body?

But she was fortunate.

Her son had not followed the Demon King but was here, right in front of her.

"The Demon King tried to deceive you."

"…"

"I'm so relieved, truly relieved. You didn't follow the Demon King. You made a wise choice."

Three people had been deceived by the Demon King's cunning tongue and followed him.

Harriet de Saint Owan.

Liana de Grantz.

Olivia Lanze.

Though there were only three of them, they were all either children of prominent nobles or individuals highly regarded as the future of the empire.

No one knew what they were doing or where they were, but it was already a shocking event.

The Demon King had tried to take advantage of Heinrich's fear and confusion.

He made an irresistible offer in a situation where it would be strange if Heinrich did not accept it.

Louise felt incredibly proud and touched that her son had rejected the Demon King's offer.

He had rejected the Demon King's proposal in a situation where refusal or resistance was impossible.

How cunning and terrifying must the Demon King be?

"Sister, I didn't follow the Demon King because I don't trust him."

Heinrich looked at Louise with a stern expression.

"What… did you say?"

He didn't follow the Demon King.

But as she saw her son trying to utter the dreadful words that he believed in the Demon King, Louise began to tremble more and more.

"I know what you're thinking, sister. You might think the Demon King lied to deceive me, or that I'm saying this because I was fooled by his lies."

Heinrich swallowed and continued speaking.

"I have no intention of following the Demon King, even if he returns, nor do I intend to cooperate. You can rest assured on this matter. However, no matter how much I think about it… no matter how much I doubt… I cannot believe that the Demon King… Reinhardt is an evil being."

"My youngest, the Demon King deceived everyone. Did he not fool everyone with his gentle and mild disguise? Did you not see those who followed and aided the Demon King up close, deceived by his mask?"

Heinrich couldn't help but lose his composure at these words, even in this situation.

Gentle and mild.

These are words that anyone who had seen the Demon King during the Temple days could not utter.

“…Sister. The Demon King was far from gentle and mild. If we were to be precise, he was a madman."

"Is… is that so?"

"Yes, he was a madman who caused all kinds of trouble. He did everything he shouldn't have done while infiltrating."

The Demon King had done far too many things that shouldn't be done if infiltration and capture were his goals.

However, Reinhardt had become friends with many people and built relationships. But, it seemed like a series of coincidences rather than a calculated plan by the Demon King.

If his true goal was capture, there would be no reason for the Demon King to act in such a manner.

It's too outcome-oriented to say that the purpose of the process was the same just because the outcome turned out that way.

The Demon King lived his Temple life like a madman. In fact, Heinrich could even be considered a victim of his antics.

But, all Louise could feel was fear looking at her son speaking about the Demon King like this.

She couldn't help but be afraid that he had already fallen for the Demon King's tricks or ploys.

"Sister, don't you think that our coalition forces have been advancing too easily at some point?"

However, Heinrich knew what to say to his sister.

“…You can't mean."

"Despite being winter, the weather has been too good, and the warp gates of small cities have been seized without any strategy. Moreover, didn't you see the scene in the recent Serandia battle, as if someone had already swept through it once?"

Definitely strange circumstances.

However, no one questioned these things.

"You don't mean that… that…"

"It is certain that the Demon King's forces are helping our advance and fighting ahead of us."

Secrets or strategies hidden by the Empire.

That's what she had vaguely thought.

But the idea that all this help was coming from the Demon King was something she didn't want to believe, regardless of its possibility.

"Why would the Demon King do that? After causing the Gate incident. Why on earth would he help us?"

"I don't know. Why the Demon King is helping us. Why the Empire is keeping this a secret. I don't know what the Demon King truly wants, but… there's one thing for certain."

The Demon King had caused the Gate incident to bring about the destruction of humanity.

"From the beginning of the Gate incident, there's something we're unaware of."

Heinrich no longer believed in that placeholder.

Ludwig was heading to the Church of Tu'an.

The fact that he could do something gave Ludwig a small consolation, but in the falling snow, he couldn't help but feel overwhelmed.

And Ludwig had heard from Rowan that, in her eyes, a collapsing building was a bigger problem than the cold caused by the snow.

Ludwig could see people clearing the snow from the roofs, as well as those on the streets.

The guards and the royal family were all focused on the snow removal, and the citizens were also working hard to clear it.

As a result, for the first time in a long while since the Gate incident, the streets of the Imperial Capital were filled with people.

However, there were many in the refugee camp who didn't have the strength for such work.

Purification was important, but was it meaningful in these circumstances? Even though the makeshift huts could not adequately protect against the cold wind, without them, people would freeze to death.

Everywhere in this land was now filled with such anguish.

Both Rowan and Ludwig knew that the purification of disease was only a temporary solution.

What Rowan was doing now had nothing to do with hope. It was merely a temporary measure against despair, unrelated to saving the world or bringing peace.

However, it was something that had to be done because they couldn't not do it.

In an era when even speaking of a small hope had become a luxury, the only thing they could do was to struggle to plug the hole in the dam of despair.

Moreover, Rowan was not just an ordinary priestess, but an archbishop, and Ludwig, though he had lost an arm, was a superhuman.

Even these people could do nothing more than small tasks in the present reality. There was no place for those even smaller.

Great deeds were for great beings.

Beings like Ellen, Heinrich, and Louise von Schwarz, who had shared breakfast with Ludwig that morning.

Individuals with immense power or the ability to command vast armies would be the ones to end this Gate incident.

Finding hope was the role assigned to them.

Once all this was over, and a time came when even a small degree of peace could be spoken of, these small tasks would find meaning.

The moment the survivors, by whatever means, faced the tasks of peace and reconstruction, what Ludwig and Rowan were doing now would have meaning in saving countless lives and giving them a future.

That's why Ludwig kept walking.

Embracing the expectation that someday everything would be alright.

Rather than despairing and giving up, he kept going because there was still something he could do.

Ludwig would not give up.

As he walked, he neared the Church where Rowan was staying.

“Where can we sell this?”

“There must be some nobles who'd be interested, right?”

Ludwig could see people running through the streets with shovels.

There were more than just one or two.

Groups that seemed to be together, yet not, were moving around as if fleeing in twos and threes.

“Damn, it would have been great if it were something to eat.”

“That was all taken a long time ago. We're lucky to have gotten this.”

“But what kind of Church doesn't have even a glimpse of gold or silver?”

“They must have sold it already. We're lucky to have gotten this much from such a poor Church.”

“Phew, it's a relief that only a bit of hair got burnt.”

“We're better off than those going in now. They're all going to die.”

Ludwig could see the smoke rising from beyond the alley.

“There's a fire!”

“…!”

Before he could even fully understand the words, Ludwig was already running.

In the pouring snow, Ludwig could see the plume of white smoke, like a Church turned upside down, defying the sky and spewing fiery red flames.

-Koo-roo-roo-roo

Countless people had gathered around, staring blankly at the enormous shape of the flames.

The Church where Rowan had been staying was engulfed in fire.

-Crack!

The sound of something breaking and collapsing could be heard.

“It's about to crumble…”

“Where are the guards?”

“Can they even put it out?”

“It's divine punishment. Punishment for those who conspired with the Demon King.”

“What nonsense! Those refugee scoundrels from the slums did this, not divine

punishment!”

Ludwig finally realized what those who had just passed by were up to.

Looting.

‘Sometimes there are people who want to set fires.’

And arson.

Someone had set the Church on fire, and others were taking advantage of the chaos to loot its treasures.

"Rowan!"

Ludwig rushed into the Church as if possessed.

The onlookers, who had been casually watching the Church burn, clicked their tongues as they saw Ludwig charge into the flames.

However, Ludwig paid no attention to their thoughts or their sarcastic comments about the Tu'an Order.

"Ugh!"

-Hiss

The inside of the smoke-filled Church was a mess. Everything that could burn was ablaze, and it was difficult to see even an inch ahead.

-Creak

And with the sounds of wood breaking and walls cracking, the Church seemed to be on the verge of collapsing.

Who could have done this? Why?

Was it really necessary to go this far, even if one despised the Tu'an Order?

In the midst of the acrid smoke, Ludwig soon saw it.

'Could it be…?'

There were people dressed as priests whom Ludwig did not recognize, lying in various places throughout the worship hall.

Although he did not have the luxury of examining them closely, Ludwig could not help but sense that they were all dead.

-Boom! Crack!

Lifting burning, collapsed pillars and raising fallen stone columns, he searched for something.

Knowing that inhaling smoke was dangerous even for a superhuman, he held his breath while searching.

He searched for the person who should be here.

How long did he wander through the smoke-filled, burning worship hall?

Soon, Ludwig saw someone sitting in front of the Tu'an Order's stone statue.

"!!!"

Archbishop Rowan.

There she was, not in her usual gray, faded robe, but in a white holy garment.

However, the originally white garment was now dyed a bright red.

"Rowan…!"

There were no words to describe Rowan's state other than 'tattered.'

Her body had been stabbed multiple times, and the holy garment that should have been white looked better suited to be called a red shroud.

Trembling, with wide-open eyes, Ludwig knelt in front of Rowan's lifeless body.

"Priestess! Priestess! Wake up!"

But even as he spoke, Ludwig knew that his call could not bring Rowan back.

Rowan's eyes, forever unseeing even in death, had been robbed of something she could never regain.

Gripping Rowan's shoulder, Ludwig poured out tears that could not become a sob, his eyes wide open in the searing heat of the fire.

"Why… why did this happen? Why… why?"

-Crack

The Church continued to burn.

-Drip!

And with the sound of something breaking that should not have been broken.

-Rumble!

The Church collapsed.

CHAPTER 585

Louise had just heard a shocking story from Heinrich.

She had already suspected that there was a secret behind the coalition's excessively smooth advance. She thought it wasn't necessary to uncover it immediately.

However, it was hard to believe the rumor that the Demon King was leading the vanguard.

Nevertheless, if it were true, she would understand why the Empire had no choice but to be silent.

If this truth were to spread, people would start to doubt the Demon King's intentions.

Just as Louise was feeling confused now, it would be disastrous if this information spread throughout the coalition.

That's why the Empire had to pretend to be unaware of the Demon King's assistance, even as they received it.

“It seems certain that the Empire's relationship with the Demon King goes beyond tacit cooperation.”

It was also hard to believe that her son had fallen for the Demon King's sweet talk. If that were true, Heinrich would have no reason to remain with the coalition. He was in a dangerous situation and had no choice but to leave, yet he didn't.

“The Empire… and the Demon King…”

Her son could have been taken by the Demon King.

But, on the other hand, the Demon King might have tried to save her son.

“If there's a truth we don't know, what do you think it is?”

“I don't know. If the Demon King didn't want the Gate incident to happen… then why did it happen… and why is the Empire hiding the truth… I really don't know.”

The Demon King had not mentioned any truth that would endanger Heinrich if he knew it.

Heinrich stared at the confused Louise.

“I apologize. I didn't mean to confuse you. But… I felt I had to tell you…”

“…”

Louise couldn't help but understand why this was happening, even without thinking deeply.

Most people believe the Demon King is the root of all evil, and the few who know the truth encourage that belief.

But if there was a different truth about the Gate incident.

If it were true that the Demon King didn't want the Gate incident to happen.

Then what would become of the world?

If the strong bond formed by hatred for the Demon King were to crumble, humanity would be finished.

Heinrich bowed his head as he watched Louise's confusion.

“I may be under the Demon King's spell… but I can't help but think that way…”

“No, you did well. You told me well…”

Although Louise still couldn't free herself from the confusion, she had to commend her son for having the courage to talk about his secret meeting with the Demon King.

Louise's mind was in turmoil because of Heinrich's words.

Who is the Demon King really, what is the truth behind the Gate incident, and what is the Empire thinking?

She knew nothing.

But does it matter if there is a truth unknown to everyone in the world?

Regardless of the intentions, the Gate incident happened, and it must be put to an end, and that fact remains unaltered in the face of any truth.

Snow still falls.

A blizzard pours down.

Snow accumulates.

Snow covers everything.

The earth, buildings, trees, and frozen rivers.

It buries everything.

The Gate incident is like this snow.

When a massive blizzard falls, everything is buried.

When a blizzard comes, everything else loses importance.

The snow had to be cleared away. It had to be continually cleared away to prevent it from engulfing and destroying everything.

Just as one must clear away the snow before it devours the world, eventually nothing becomes more important than the snow itself.

Truth too, buried beneath the blizzard called the Gate Incident, had become invisible and unimportant.

The Gate Incident must be resolved.

That absolute proposition buried all truth and justice.

And thus, another absolute proposition: the buried truth is not important.

Louise von Schwarz had no choice but to realize this.

But if the Demon King really was such an entity.

Fighting at the forefront to end the Gate Incident, yet unrecognized by anyone in the world.

"If what you say is true… and if it's really such a situation."

How terrifying, powerful, and yet,

How sad an existence must the Demon King be.

"How sad. All of this."

Louise sighed, looking up at the sky.

Heinrich and Louise walked aimlessly down the street in the Temple.

What the Demon King said to Heinrich might have been a lie.

However, it was also difficult to assume that the Demon King had lied. If he had intended to deceive, he should have at least said something.

Words like "It's dangerous, so let's go together."

"I'll tell you what's been going on so far if you follow me."

He said nothing else and even stepped back meekly when Heinrich refused.

Heinrich's opinions on the Demon King and the events in the allied forces were the result of his own thoughts and judgments.

The fact that the Demon King had been watching the Allied Forces' base all this time was a chilling story to Louise, but in the end, the Demon King had not even attempted to deceive Heinrich.

Indeed, Heinrich's life was truly in danger. An assassination attempt had taken place,

but hadn't Louise dealt with it?

If Louise had not intervened, Heinrich would have been killed.

The Demon King didn't want Heinrich to kill his brothers, nor to be killed by them.

That's why he wanted Heinrich to join him.

When the Demon King came to find Heinrich, he said nothing other than the fact that an assassination attempt would occur.

So, there was only Heinrich's judgment.

Thinking this way, Louise found it strange.

He was despised by his brothers, his life was in danger, and he didn't even know the truth about Louise.

"My youngest."

"Yes, sister."

"Wasn't it… wrong not to leave?"

"It would have been right, at that moment."

"Yes, you were in danger, and you didn't know what would happen in the future. I didn't even know I would do such a thing either."

In a situation where safety was uncertain, it was inevitable to think that Heinrich's decision to stay was foolish.

"There were various reasons… but if I decided to leave, I could see the consequences that would unfold. Our soldiers, officers, royalty, and even Kernstadt would be affected."

"Ah…"

Louise couldn't help but be dumbfounded, as she hadn't imagined that Heinrich had such a mindset.

"Even with my limited mind, I could tell that people would receive such gazes and resentment."

"…"

"So, I decided not to leave."

Regardless of the reasons, it would be seen as betrayal.

The people from Kernstadt would receive the same gaze as those from Tu'an Order, the Als Order, and the people from Saint Owan Duchy.

Knowing it was dangerous to think so, he still did not leave.

At those words, Louise felt as if her breath was being taken away.

"And if I had left… This would never have happened, and this time would never have existed. Forever… I would have known nothing."

Not all of his siblings hated him. He would never have known that some of them were just hesitant, finding it difficult to face him.

"I'm glad you didn't leave."

Heinrich looked at Louise.

The war had changed many things, and it had plunged far too many people into misery.

But not everything changed for the worse. Heinrich had gradually become someone capable of contemplating many things.

Overwhelmed with emotion and regret, Louise couldn't find the right words.

Instead of hating her for knowing the truth, her son was grateful, embracing the situation with joy. Louise couldn't help but be thankful for so many things.

How long had they walked in this pleasant silence?

“…Huh?"

The two, walking quietly, had no choice but to stop when they heard voices in the distance.

On the opposite side of the path they were walking, a group of guards was blocking the road.

"Is this a restricted area?"

"It seems so…"

The guards did not speak to Heinrich and Louise, but their stance blocking the road clearly indicated that this was a controlled area.

By walking aimlessly, they had stumbled upon a place they would never have entered otherwise.

"It seems… this is the university grounds."

"Ah, I see. Then it's understandable."

However, a restricted area? Louise and Heinrich looked at the grounds blocked by the guards and the buildings beyond. As if it was not an issue to look, the distant guards paid no attention to the two.

But was there a reason to control access?

Few passersby were in the area, so there would be no one who would casually venture there.

"If it's a controlled area with no one coming and going…"

There must be something happening inside that is considered confidential.

And the scale of the visible security force was anything but ordinary. Although they couldn't know what was happening inside, with that level of security, something of even greater magnitude must be taking place.

"It seems to be a magic university."

Having seen the sign, Heinrich nodded slowly as if he understood what the

university inside the controlled area was.

"A magic university… So, they must be conducting some kind of research."

Louise agreed, nodding her head, thinking that it must be something the Empire would treat as confidential.

"Are they trying to create another Titan? If such a weapon is developed again, it would be good for everyone…"

"It's probably not a Titan. I heard they don't have the resources to make another one."

"Really? Then they must be working on another large-scale magic weapon or something else?"

"If it helps the war effort, anything would be good."

"That's true…"

The Titan.

Upon witnessing its power, Louise felt both shudders and fear. She thought time and time again how fortunate it was that the Titan was on their side.

Even those who opposed the Empire, even if they were the Demon King's army, would have been crushed under the Titan's feet and vanished without a trace.

The Empire was doing something at the Temple Magic University. It wasn't the Titan, but they were researching something.

It seemed that the B-class peers had been included in the research. They were said to be at the temple, but they were hardly ever seen returning to the dormitory from the magic university.

Although Heinrich couldn't know the details, he could guess that Louis Ancton, Christina, and Anna de Gerna would be involved in the research being conducted there.

"Wasn't a girl named Adelia involved in the Titan Project as well? Your friend…"

"Yes, that's right."

Adelia's power cartridge was a great invention, but the Titan surpassed it overwhelmingly.

But this time, even other peers were involved.

What kind of weapon could it be?

"All your friends are… incredibly talented, to say the least."

The children from the second year of the temple.

Louise couldn't help but think that an unusual number of monstrously talented people were gathered in that grade.

Geniuses and disasters were gathered in a strange way.

Could it be an all too terrible coincidence?

Louise and Heinrich walked slowly through the snow-covered streets of the temple, leaving the magic university behind.

Ludwig left the security headquarters with a desolate expression.

There was no way the debris from the collapsing church could have killed Ludwig. After rescuing Rowan's corpse from the pile of stones in the collapsing church, Ludwig encountered the guards who had come to clean up the fire scene.

He was then taken to the security headquarters, pledging to fully cooperate with the investigation.

However, the answer Ludwig heard left him dumbfounded.

“…It's difficult."

"Difficult, you say?"

"Yes. If they were caught at the scene, it would be different. But if dozens of thugs attacked the church and scattered… if it was a spontaneous crime rather than organized… finding the suspects would be very difficult."

"I saw them with my own eyes. People looting the church and running away… I didn't see everyone, but I saw them clearly. I remember."

"Ludwig, the population of the Empire is over 100 million now. And if the crime was committed by people from a refugee village, where even their identities have not been properly determined… catching the criminals is virtually impossible."

If the attackers were hiding somewhere in the maze-like alleys of the refugee village, it would be impossible to find them.

"And with the weather like this…"

In the current situation, where they are overwhelmed by dealing with the heavy snowfall, there is neither the manpower nor the possibility of finding the criminals.

Ludwig didn't know what to say.

This is the reality of the Empire, where catching criminals is nearly impossible unless the crime happens right in front of you.

Spontaneous crimes, spontaneous arson, spontaneous looting.

The spontaneous nature of these incidents made it virtually impossible to catch the criminals, and the security forces were already marking it as impossible before even starting the investigation.

The deep fatigue on the face of the person in charge made it clear that he was not being irresponsible in his statements.

"But… are we just going to let this go? Without any investigation, without doing anything? Just like that?"

The security force has the power of summary execution, at least because they maintain some semblance of social order.

But if they give up on this case where social order has completely collapsed, what

have the security forces been doing up until now?

If the guards aren't doing their job, they shouldn't have the right to kill people as they please.

With a hollow expression, Ludwig looked at the guard captain, who let out a deep sigh.

"Ludwig, this case is not within our jurisdiction. Even if we wanted to investigate, we wouldn't be allowed to."

"What do you mean?"

"It's a case of arson, looting, and murder that occurred in the church of the Five Great Religions."

Ludwig could somewhat guess why the guard captain seemed to be washing his hands of the matter.

"The authority to investigate this case lies with the Holy Knights."

The guard captain implied that, while they had no intention to investigate, even if they wanted to, they couldn't.

They had cleaned up the scene, but the Holy Knights would likely conduct their own internal investigation.

"We don't know if the Holy Knights can properly track down the culprits, but we'll probably have to hand over the case materials to them."

After hearing that, Ludwig left the district's guard headquarters.

Rowan was dead.

Most of the people who had been staying at the church were dead as well.

And finding the culprits was practically impossible.

Ludwig walked the streets in a daze.

Archbishop Rowan.

She was a peculiar woman, but she was never evil.

It was unclear if the thugs' target had been the food inside the church or their anger was directed at the Tu’an Order.

But Rowan, who had tirelessly roamed the streets to help people without even getting proper rest, had been brutally murdered.

Why?

Why did it have to come to this?

And they're not even getting caught?

Was a person who could save tens of thousands of lives worth just a piece of bread?

That didn't make sense.

This kind of thing shouldn't happen.

Even the guards themselves said they couldn't find those people and didn't have the resources in the first place.

Ludwig didn't overestimate himself.

He didn't think he could do what the guards couldn't.

This wasn't a matter of strength but intelligence.

And it required the power to get involved in the case.

Ludwig's thoughts had reached that point.

He lacked the power to get involved in the case and the intelligence to solve it.

He needed help.

Someone's help.

Desperately.

Those who committed such acts needed to be punished.

With that thought in mind, Ludwig walked the streets, his eyes wide open.

CHAPTER 586

"Meow."

-Meow!

I was not sure why she's been playing this prank lately.

She kept opening her mouth wide and pretends to swallow my face.

Did she not know that from a cat's perspective, this was terrifying?

Regardless of whether it felt strange or not, it was just scary!

I'm glad she didn't bother with meaningless things like patrolling the Imperial Capital.

But, it was getting scary that she didn't seem to have anything else on her mind other than playing with the cat all day.

Ellen mumbled while lying face down on the bed, with me at the head of the bed.

Fortunately, Ellen hasn't been spacing out lately, which was nice.

I was glad that animal therapy seemed to be very effective.

"You're so cute."

Hmm.

You're not too bad yourself.

Of course, even so, when Ellen looked out the window at the still falling snow, her expression darkened.

It was coming down terribly.

There was nothing Ellen can do when the snow covered everything in the world. After all, snow was not a monster.

There was nothing a hero can do in a snowstorm.

So all that was left to do is rest.

After lazing around for a while, Ellen got up and hugged me.

Hmm.

Was it already lunchtime?

This must be what it meant for time to melt away.

Lunchtime.

Heinrich and Louise had finished their walk and were sitting in the banquet hall, eating in time.

However, the atmosphere was slightly different than usual.

Not the atmosphere between the two, but the atmosphere in the banquet hall.

“Students who wish to support the Imperial Capital snow removal work, please sign up and report to the dormitory teacher.”

The servants were announcing this to those entering the banquet hall.

The snow removal work must be overflowing all over the Imperial Capital.

Although it was not compulsory, there was a sense of responsibility and a sense of mission for those with power.

So, the place was crowded with students signing up.

Superhumans covered in blue flames of mana were not wielding swords and spears but shovels, clearing snow off the Imperial Capital.

Of course, there were not only superhumans but also magic majors and supernaturals. If they were to be mobilized for the Imperial Capital snow removal, they could provide significant help.

Wait a minute.

Ellen stopped eating and glanced at the bustling area of snow removal volunteers.

…She could do it, but.

A hero clearing snow.

"Ah, Ellen."

Heinrich pretended to notice when Ellen sat down with some food nearby. Louise von Schwarz was cutting a sausage next to him.

"Are you going to help clear the snow?"

"There's nothing else to do, so."

It was not a dangerous job, but…

Do you know that clearing snow can make you hate snow?

No, it seemed that she already hated it enough.

"If you want to do it, go ahead. There's no rule saying that using your abilities won't help. Who knows, there might be a good way if you think about it."

"Ah… Yes, sister."

It seemed that Louise had no intention of forcing Heinrich's actions and was already halfway to granting permission.

Right now, the snow falling on the Imperial Capital was the most urgent issue.

If the situation became too serious, I might consider contacting Liana.

Still, everyone had something they could do that helped people and wasn't

dangerous, rather than just resting. That's why the usually quiet atmosphere was slightly exciting.

A considerable number of them were nobles and the cream of the crop from the Empire.

Faced with a crisis known as the Gate Incident, they fought for the sake of humanity.

No matter their origin, no matter how they were raised, their experiences had instilled within them the belief that they must use their power for the sake of others.

That was why, whether they were of noble birth or a commoner, they believed they had to take action when people were dying due to the snow.

While their thoughts seemed grand, in the end, they were filled with sadness.

Suddenly.

From somewhere.

There was a smell… like smoke.

There was a smell of smoke.

What was it?

Looking around, I couldn't help but find the source of the odor.

Ludwig.

"Ludwig…?"

Heinrich narrowed his eyes as he looked at Ludwig.

The smell of smoke was apparent, and he looked battered.

"Guys…”

Ludwig slowly approached Ellen and Heinrich.

"Help me…”

"Hey, what happened to you? Did something happen?"

Heinrich got up from his seat, and the others stared blankly at the disheveled Ludwig.

"Just… once…”

Ludwig mumbled blankly.

"Can you help…?"

He looked completely out of it, as if he had gone through something incredibly traumatic.

As it was clear that Ludwig had gone through a harrowing ordeal, Heinrich, Ellen, and Louise quickly finished their meal.

Exiting the banquet hall, they headed to the B-class dormitory lobby.

"First, you need to wash up. Are you injured anywhere?"

"No, I'm not hurt… I'm not hurt… yeah… I'm not hurt…”

As if broken, Ludwig repeated the same phrase, and Louise grabbed his shoulder.

"Go wash up first. Cool your head, change your clothes, and then we'll talk. Got it?"

"Yes… Commander…”

At the gentle but stern words of Louise, Ludwig nodded slowly, his face pale.

We all watched in a daze as Ludwig stumbled to his room.

"What happened to him? What on earth did he go through?"

“…I don't know."

"It seems like he was at a fire scene…"

Ellen, holding me, looked worriedly at Ludwig's room.

Ludwig soon washed up, changed his clothes, and returned to the lobby.

He still didn't seem completely at ease.

Ludwig was so distraught that he stammered as he explained the situation. He wasn't very articulate to begin with, but after experiencing something major, his words were even more tangled.

"Raid?"

"Uh… people… they set fire to the church where the priestess was… they looted… and killed everyone in the church…"

Ellen, Louise, and Heinrich couldn't help but widen their eyes.

"By the time I got there, it was too late. Everyone was dead. The church was on fire. I tried to find the priestess, but she was already… brutally… murdered… and the building collapsed…"

Ludwig was trapped under the collapsing building, but a superhuman like him wouldn't die from that.

Ludwig managed to escape from the collapsing temple, along with the body of Rowan.

Then, he watched as the arriving security forces and mages put out the fire to control the situation.

After investigating Ludwig, the security forces realized he wasn't involved and let him go.

The reason the smell of smoke was so strong on him was because he had rushed into the fire scene.

In the end, Ludwig could only return to the temple without being able to do anything.

"This can't… This can't be right. What did the priestess do wrong? It wasn't the priestess who did something wrong. What did the church people do to deserve this? People were talking as if it was a good thing that the fire broke out and that the dead were better off. This can't be right."

Anger could be felt in Ludwig's eyes.

"I… I don't know. I can't help but think that such things shouldn't happen. And…"

Ludwig looked at Ellen and Heinrich as he spoke.

"I understand that the people who did this must be punished. But how to find those people… I have no idea."

Ludwig muttered blankly.

"I saw the people who pillaged the temple and fled. I want to find them. I want to ask them why they did such a thing. Why they had to do that… I want to at least ask. They were trying to save people, they were good people. Why did they have to kill them…?"

Ludwig had even seen the culprits himself. However, he had no authority to investigate, and even if he did, he didn't believe he could catch them.

"I'm sorry. I know I don't have any right to ask this of you, but I can't do it…"

Sorrow, frustration, and anger swirled in Ludwig's expression and gaze.

Ludwig had neither power nor strength, and he didn't think he could solve it.

That's why he returned to the temple to seek help.

Someone who had power, strength, and wisdom might be able to help him.

There was only one person who came to mind for Ludwig.

"Can you help me… just once?"

Of course, there was no one else but Ellen Artorius.

Ellen nodded her head as if it was a matter of course, looking at the desperate expression on Ludwig's face.

"Yes, I'll help you."

Feeling guilty towards Ludwig, Ellen naturally couldn't refuse his request.

The arson, murder, and looting that occurred in the church of Tu'an.

Ludwig asked Ellen for help, and without hesitation, Ellen agreed to help.

Louise and Heinrich didn't answer immediately, but they quietly listened to Ludwig's words.

Ludwig explained what he had witnessed as much as he could.

"The priestess told me. There were people who desecrated the church and those who tried to set it on fire. Maybe… the people who did such things joined forces and caused this. That's what I think."

Hatred towards Tu'an and Als' faith occasionally led to attacks on churches.

Defacing and desecrating the church was common, and sometimes there were people who tried to set it on fire.

And that arson attempt had turned into an actual incident.

"Are you sure that everyone inside the temple is dead?"

At Ellen's question, Ludwig nodded his head.

"I didn't see anyone alive when I entered the temple."

Ellen, who had agreed to help, remained calm and composed.

"And you're saying this was done by 'ordinary' people?"

"I saw people looting the temple and leaving. They seemed to be saying things like food was better than these items. No, I didn't just think I heard it, I definitely heard it. Clearly."

Hearing Ludwig's words, Ellen, who had been contemplating for a moment, calmly spoke while looking at him.

"There are many priests who aren't particularly exceptional in their physical abilities. But a high-ranking Archbishop… Is it possible for them to be killed by ordinary people?"

Exactly.

That's the problem.

No matter how much resentment fuels the attackers, is it possible for an Archbishop and everyone in the temple to be killed?

I had the same thoughts as Ellen.

However, Ludwig shook his head at Ellen's words.

"I had that thought too. But if Priestess Rowan had been capable of fighting, she wouldn't have needed me as a bodyguard in the first place. And if something happened during the purification process… I would have fled with the priestess."

There's a point to Ludwig's words.

If Archbishop Rowan had the ability to fight for herself, there would have been no reason to employ Ludwig as a bodyguard. There's no reason for someone who can protect themselves to do so.

"Also, the church wasn't that big. I think… there were no holy knights. There were no corpses wearing armor either…"

The number of priests was extremely low, and the majority of the combat-capable forces were with the allied army. Furthermore, this wasn't the headquarters of the Holy Knights Order but rather an individual church of the Five Great Religions in the Empire, and it was small in scale.

It's understandable that there wasn't a single holy knight present.

The shabby church was in a state where it could be attacked by bandits, and it's not impossible for everyone to be killed.

Bandits could have invaded the church, killed the priests and believers, and set fire to it.

It's not an entirely impossible scenario. It's just highly unlikely, considering how much the faiths of Tu'an and Als are persecuted in the Empire.

Ludwig seemed to find it hard to bear that people's anger was being directed at innocent individuals in such a way.

"As you said, if this was the work of bandits, neither the guards nor the Holy Knights Order could catch all the culprits. The same goes for me."

Ellen doesn't have any special abilities either.

"Is that so…"

Ludwig thought that if it was someone other than himself, someone smarter, there might be a better way, so he sought Ellen's help.

However, if this was a bandit attack and looting of the church, there's nothing to be found, even if it's Ellen.

Ellen seemed to be lost in thought, silently considering the possibility that if what Ludwig said was true, she might not know either.

In such a situation, Louise von Schwarz silently looked at Ludwig.

It was clear that Louise had a great fondness for Ludwig's good-hearted nature, and just yesterday she had received his help.

Therefore, it was evident that she wanted to help Ludwig in any way she could during his struggle.

"There are a few issues we need to clarify, though I don't know the details."

"What kind of…?"

"We have to think about this incident in three stages."

Louise counts on her fingers.

"Murder."

"Arson."

"And looting."

"This incident can be divided into these three stages."

"So, the most important thing is the order."

"Whether murder comes first, arson comes first, or looting comes first. We need to clarify the attackers' initial purpose."

Louise breaks the case down into segments.

"There's a possibility that plunder was the motive. If they attacked the temple for that reason, they must have been discovered by the priests during the looting and killed them. In that case, it would have started with theft. When the theft was discovered, they killed the priests and later set the fire. I don't see a clear reason for arson, though."

Louise continued speaking slowly.

"Murder could have been the motive. If so, they attacked the temple, killed the priests, and then looted the empty temple. Perhaps they didn't want to leave the temple's belongings behind. The arson could be an expression of their anger, in its own way."

Heinrich was also listening attentively to Louise's words.

"The possibility of arson as the main motive is very low. If they set the fire, the priests would have escaped the temple. But, Ludwig, you said that all the priests were dead when you entered the temple. That means the arson must have happened after the murder."

The discussion about the order and purpose of the events.

Arson was ranked lower in priority.

Her words suggested that the motive was either plunder or murder, and arson wasn't the main goal. Ludwig seemed to lose his nerve at this.

"Why is the order important?"

"It's important," said Louise.

"Because the murderer, the plunderer, and the arsonist might all be different people."

Louise looked at Ellen.

It seemed like she wanted to know if Ellen understood the meaning.

"You mean that these three events could have happened at different times, by different people."

"Exactly."

Louise was suggesting that the events, which seemed to be a single incident, might have actually been caused by different people.

"Even if it was the work of bandits, the ones who killed the priests, stole the items, and set the fire could all be different, and the time when these events occurred could also be different."

"And,"

"Like you said, Ludwig, even if the temple's security was weak. I think this is the right way of thinking."

"No matter how many bandits there are, or how incapable the priests are in battle,"

"The likelihood of a high-ranking priest like an archbishop being killed by bandits seems very low."

Both Louise and Ellen seemed to think that this incident was not an ordinary one.

In the end, sitting and talking wouldn't change anything.

"Let's go to the scene."

That's what Ellen said.

The crucial difference between Ludwig and Ellen.

In the land of humans, there was no door that remained closed before the name of Ellen Artorius.

This holds true for the guards and the Holy Knights as well.

"Um… Sister,"

Heinrich cautiously addressed Louise.

With her usual stern expression, Louise looked at Heinrich. This person, who seemed utterly cold-hearted at first glance, ultimately killed her two siblings for Heinrich's sake.

It's hard to fathom how terrible she must feel about Heinrich and how much guilt she carries.

"It's a matter of helping a friend, so there's no reason for me not to do it. Besides, I could use a little action myself."

Both Heinrich and Louise have come to take a break.

They haven't come with a political purpose.

"Of course, if it's deemed dangerous, we'll have to stop."

Louise said this while looking at Ludwig.

"So, I'll come along too."

It seemed that, regardless of whether she was helping or not, she intended to make everyone back off if the situation was deemed dangerous. From her perspective, there was no reason to stand by and watch Heinrich get involved in something risky.

"Th-thank you…”

Ludwig's expression became flustered when, following Ellen, an unexpected person also offered to help.

What was this?

The situation was getting bigger.

For some reason, this matter didn’t seem like it will end ordinarily.

The people gathered here suddenly became involved in a suspicious affair.

Somehow, he had a feeling that the outcome wouldn't be very good.

Although he had a strong urge to stop it, as a cat, he could only meow and couldn't say anything else.

CHAPTER 587

Heinrich, Ludwig, Ellen, and Louise.

The unexpected group of four suddenly left the temple. Naturally, the cat was left behind in the temple. It wasn't a suitable place for it to go.

Among them were people who disliked being the center of attention and those who absolutely shouldn't be noticed. Thus, all of them wore their hoods up.

There was no particular need for them to move covertly, but there was no need to draw too much attention either.

However, as Heinrich looked at the snow piled up on the streets and the numerous guards clearing it away, he couldn't help but wear a guilt-ridden expression.

Ellen, who was leading the group, looked at Ludwig.

"Tell me everything you know about that priestess."

"You mean Priestess Rowan?"

"Yes."

"Is… that important?"

"It might be, depending on the situation."

Ellen didn't bother explaining to Ludwig why the story about Rowan was important.

Ludwig began speaking within the limits of his knowledge.

Her name was Rowan.

As a priest, she held the rank of archbishop.

And she was assigned the task of performing purification work while receiving

protection from the guards.

"It's quite serious for an archbishop-ranked priest to be wandering the streets alone."

"Yes…"

"Indeed… It couldn't be helped. Most of the priests and holy knights would be with the allied forces, and the number of Tu'an priests has significantly decreased…"

The number of priests was so low that an archbishop-ranked priest had no choice but to wander alone, despite the numerous places where their presence was needed.

Louise nodded, seemingly understanding the meaning.

Telling everything they knew about Rowan might help the case.

Rowan was already dead, but Ludwig tried to recall how much he knew about her.

He didn't think Rowan deserved to die, but Ludwig didn't know much about her.

After all, they had only spent less than a week together, so there wasn't much to know.

Still, Ludwig recalled what he could.

The story about the archbishop.

"…I heard such a story."

"What story?"

"Originally, Priestess Rowan was a bishop, but she became an archbishop after the Gate incident…"

At those words, Ellen and Heinrich slowly nodded.

"Because there were too many vacant positions, someone had to fill them, so she ended up taking a position that was beyond her capabilities… That's what I clearly heard."

Ludwig's memory was good, even if his ability to piece clues together and draw conclusions was lacking.

Rowan was not a lord who had lost her territory.

Rather, she had received the archbishop's position after the Gate incident.

"Performing the duties of an archbishop while managing drastically reduced dioceses means that she wasn't an archbishop acting as a diocese administrator."

Ellen spoke as they walked calmly.

"She probably had other duties, and perhaps there were separate responsibilities and tasks she had taken on."

They didn't know what they were chasing yet, but they were certain about what to focus on.

And understanding who Rowan was properly was also important.

Ludwig couldn't help but feel strange.

Rowan was a dead person.

She had been murdered, but Ellen was asking about a completely different victim, not the scene of the fire or the suspect's appearance.

However, Ludwig thought Ellen might be considering something he couldn't see, so he tried his best to provide as much information as possible.

"Before we parted ways yesterday, I asked what exactly she was doing."

"What did she say in response?"

Heinrich asked at Ludwig's words.

"She said she was performing purification work while also investigating strange occurrences in the refugee camp. She said that strange things happened in places where too many people were dying, and she tried to handle them if possible."

"Strange occurrences?"

"Yes, I'm sure. She said she was dealing with that too."

At Ludwig's words, Louise nodded slowly from under her hood.

"If we don't attribute much importance to it, it would seem that she tried to handle unspecified situations occurring in the refugee camp. If we think about a slightly dangerous possibility…"

Louise spoke quietly.

"She was always on high alert for everything that happened in the refugee camp. It has the same meaning."

"What does that mean, sister?"

Louise stared intently at Heinrich, who asked the question.

"It means that her actual role could have been gathering information or surveillance in the refugee camp."

It was Ellen, not Louise, who answered.

"Are there any organizations related to information gathering within the Holy Knights or the Tu'an Order?"

"Um…"

The discussion was moving to a stage where they might be dealing with matters they shouldn't touch upon.

"The Holy Knights, where the power of the Five Great Churches is united, hold greater power than most nations."

"That's right."

"If such a large-scale force didn't have an internal organization dedicated to gathering information, that would be even stranger."

"Wait… So are you saying that Rowan was like a spy?"

Ludwig said, flustered.

"And why do we keep talking about Rowan?"

Rowan was a victim, a casualty. However, Ellen and Louise talked about Rowan as if she were the key to the case, as if she were a suspect.

"Ludwig."

"Y-yes?"

Ellen looked at Ludwig.

"If this is a simple act of vengeance, there's nothing I can do."

"…"

"If Rowan had been an ordinary priestess and really just a person doing purification work, she would have been an unfortunate victim."

Ellen spoke as Ludwig's expression grew increasingly tense.

"But if Archbishop Rowan wasn't an ordinary priestess, this case couldn't be ordinary either."

Archbishop Rowan. Depending on who she was, the case would be different. If it were an ordinary case, Ellen would have nothing to do.

"If it's not an ordinary case, I might be able to find something out."

Only when the case was suspicious could corners be revealed where information could be found. Originally, the simpler a case was, the more difficult it was to solve, and the more complex it became, the easier it was to find clues called leads.

Ellen focused on the victim rather than the suspects to find out if there was even a little complexity in the case.

"That's why I'm asking."

There was still nothing for certain.

Just in case, she asked for now.

Ellen added that as she walked.

The group had no choice but to stop at the edge of the road where the burned church was visible in the distance.

"It's only natural that it's under control."

It was Louise's words, and everyone nodded.

"It's not the guards, but the Holy Knights' forces."

As Ludwig heard from the guard in charge, the crime scene was already under the protection of the Holy Knights' forces, not the guards.

There were onlookers around the burned church, but most of them hurriedly passed by, shushing each other out of fear of the sparks.

"I cannot interfere with the affairs of the royal family or the Holy Knights. You know what I mean, right?"

"Yes."

She had too many responsibilities on her shoulders to act impulsively out of curiosity.

While Louise wanted to help Ludwig, she could only do so without crossing the boundaries of her personal sphere. If people began to doubt her intentions, it would create more problems.

"I don't plan on getting close. Little brother, you're in a slightly different situation than me, but there's nothing good about getting close carelessly."

"Yes, sister."

Heinrich nodded his head with a firm expression, as if he understood Louise's concerns.

There would be no benefit to Louise getting involved with the affairs of the Holy Knights due to her political position.

She could only offer advice and had no intention of getting directly involved in the matter.

Besides, Ludwig was considered no different from a civilian by the Holy Knights, so they would not open the way for him.

However, a person with immense, intangible power, capable of accessing any matter involving the royal family or the Holy Knights, was present.

Lament and Lapelt.

There was no door that would remain closed in front of the masters of the two divine relics.

"Ludwig, follow me."

And it was entirely possible to bring along a companion.

Ellen's task was simple.

"What's going on?"

She approached the Holy Knights blocking the burned church, removed her hood, and asked them.

"Y-you're the Hero…?"

The knight who appeared to be in charge froze upon seeing Ellen, who was looking inside the temple.

Ellen didn't hold any official position within the Holy Knights or the Five Great Religions.

However, being the master of two divine relics symbolized an authority greater than that of the Pope or the Commander of the Holy Knights.

To oppose Ellen's words was to oppose the will of the gods.

"Last night, thugs set fire to this church and massacred the priests. We were dispatched to secure and preserve the site."

The Holy Knight nodded quietly in response to Ellen's question.

"May I take a look inside?"

"There's a risk of collapse due to the fire! Hero, if you go in recklessly…"

"I'll be fine even if a building ten times this size collapses on me."

"B-but, if you're alone it would be one thing, but with an outsider…"

The Holy Knight frowned at the idea of Ellen entering with Ludwig as well.

"He's my friend."

"Even so…"

"Is there a problem?"

The Holy Knight couldn't say anything in response to Ellen's words.

Ellen was the representative of the gods.

No matter where the order came from, nothing could outweigh Ellen's words.

Ellen didn't even wait for the hesitant Holy Knight's response.

There was no audacious Holy Knight who could dare to grab Ellen's shoulder.

While she entered the temple with reckless abandon, Ellen could do so without any problems.

As long as she didn't actively use it, Ellen was someone who could be forgiven for any

misdeed.

The burned temple was in a precarious state, with parts of the roof collapsed and the risk of it crumbling at any moment.

Naturally, the Holy Knights guarding the entrance were justifiably concerned about Ellen entering the dangerous area.

'He's following.'

However, Ellen noticed something else.

As Ellen entered the scene, a Holy Knight followed her. His nervous demeanor resembled a mouse in front of a cat.

Ellen looked around the interior of the temple. All the furnishings inside, including the chairs, had been burned, and the stone walls were covered in black soot.

Ludwig, of course, couldn't help but have a terrible expression.

Although the fire had been suppressed, he had seen countless corpses here.

Being back at the scene, the horrifying sight from the morning inevitably resurfaced in his mind.

"What happened here?"

"We're still investigating, so we're not certain yet. It's presumed that unidentified individuals attacked the church, plundered items, killed the priests, and then set fire."

The Holy Knights themselves were uncertain about how the incident had unfolded.

"Have the casualties been identified?"

"Three lay believers, three priests, and seven church personnel… All of them were found dead."

Ellen nodded upon hearing this.

'It's impossible to know the scale of the thugs… but with that number, proper resistance would have been impossible.'

The church wasn't that large to begin with, and there were very few personnel inside. It was inevitable, given the decline in the resources of the Tu'an Faith.

'Everyone's dead… Under these circumstances, it's not so strange that they were defeated by the thugs.'

This church was too small in scale.

As a result, the possibility that Louise and Ellen's speculation - that an archbishop-level priest couldn't be easily killed by ordinary people - was incorrect had become much higher.

CHAPTER 588

"Have all the corpses been recovered?"

"Yes, they are currently being transported to the Holy Knights' headquarters."

Ellen silently surveyed the interior of the burnt church.

There were no bodies to be found at the scene. It was clear that recovering the corpses quickly was crucial, as parts of the church had already collapsed.

Ludwig looked around the interior of the church with a stern expression.

Ellen also examined the burnt sanctuary of the church.

'The possibility of a bandit attack is high.'

The church was small enough that it could easily be raided by civilians, and the priests could be killed.

Capturing the culprits would be difficult, but the likelihood of something else being hidden behind this incident had increased.

"How was the fire situation?"

"It is presumed that arson occurred after all the priests were killed. And it seems that those who came to watch the fire entered the church and stole things."

"So they looted after seeing the fire?"

"Yes. There were multiple witnesses. They tried to enter as soon as they saw the fire."

"I see…"

At that, both Ludwig and Ellen furrowed their brows.

As Louise had said, there was an order to the events.

However, arson wasn't the last. Looting could have been the final act.

"So, they didn't set the fire and then loot, but looted after seeing the fire?"

"Yes…"

It wouldn't normally happen, but every penny and meal were crucial in this situation.

The church was on fire.

Those who were watching the fire attempted to loot, hoping to get their hands on something valuable or even food from inside.

Their assumption that arson was the last act was wrong. It was a thought that didn't take into account the desperation of the people.

Looting was the last act.

And the looters were not the murderers but mere onlookers.

They rushed into the fire scene to steal.

Of course, there was also a possibility that the killers had looted and set the fire, and then the onlookers stole what was left.

'If arson was first, the priests would have escaped the church before being engulfed by the flames. Arson happened after the killings. Looting was committed by the onlookers.'

'The order was: killing the priests, arson, and then looting.'

'Then, it's likely that the murderers killed the priests and set the fire. We still don't know their motive, though.'

'At least the looters Ludwig saw are not the murderers. They are petty thieves.'

'But I know one thing now.'

After organizing her thoughts, Ellen looked at the restless knight.

"Is there any chance of catching the culprits in this case?"

“…I cannot give you a definite answer yet."

At Ellen's question, the knight hesitated and only gave that response.

If this was really an act of a crowd turned bandits, regardless of whether Rowan was an actual priestess or not, there would be no corner for Ludwig and Ellen to uncover more information even if they got more involved.

Even if they searched, they would only catch a few petty thieves, and they might not be the ones who killed the priests.

'Although there's a possibility of civilian massacres by the Holy Knights being used as an excuse, the likelihood of the Holy Knights committing such an act in a situation where they are already not looked upon favorably is low… '

Ellen pondered.

It was by no means a good thing, but if she said that the incident was as it seemed on the surface, Ludwig would back down.

The thugs attacked the church and set it on fire.

The culprit was a civilian, and Rowan, with her subpar combat abilities, was mercilessly killed in the face of the slashing blade, unable to save herself through the power of recovery alone.

Whether Rowan's true role was that of a spy or something else, there was no reason for Ludwig to find out.

"Hero, please leave this matter to us…”

However, Ellen was conscious of the presence of the knight beside her, who was constantly trying to send her away.

Like a thief with a guilty conscience, the knight seemed very uneasy about Ellen being in this place.

The knight's unease was preventing Ellen from leaving.

'They've recovered all the bodies… '

It was not unreasonable to remove the corpses quickly, as they might be buried under collapsing buildings if left at the scene.

But the entire building had not been burned, nor had it completely collapsed.

Ellen examined the wall of the unburned building.

'Bloodstains… '

She confirmed the presence of bloodstains in an area where she presumed the body had been.

Ellen imagined what the murder scene might have been like.

The victim was killed while leaning against the wall.

'Blood splattered on the wall, and a large amount of blood on the floor… They must have died instantly here.'

'The weapon used was a blade, probably a sword… '

'The direction of the blood splatter is upwards to the right, which means the attack came from left to right in an upward motion… '

'Not cutting downward but upward, which isn't the most effective way to put force into it.'

'Judging by the amount of blood, it's not a simple cut, but a severed wound. The bone was cut along with it. Otherwise, there wouldn't be so much blood.'

'A civilian who doesn't even know how to handle a weapon properly couldn't possibly sever someone's bone in one go… '

'Absolutely not.'

Ellen closely examined the bloodstained wall.

'Among the attackers, there must have been someone capable of Magic Body Strengthening.'

Looking at the evidence, Ellen deduced the circumstances of the slaughter, which would have been impossible with the ordinary strength of a normal human.

She didn't know if the knights had failed to find any clues, or if they knew but chose not to say anything.

It was unclear whether Ellen was being kept in the dark simply because she was an outsider, because revealing the information would be detrimental, or because they were genuinely unaware of the evidence right in front of them.

"Do you… know anything?"

As Ellen pondered deeply, Ludwig asked softly.

"No, not really."

Due to the watchful eyes beside her, Ellen chose not to share what she had discovered.

Ellen also inspected other areas beyond the chapel.

The church was not intact; some places were in ruins.

The area behind the church, beyond the chapel, had collapsed completely, including the rooms where the priests lived and the kitchen. Cold winds blew through the open roof, and snow had already piled up in a pristine white layer.

"Hero, there might be more collapses."

"It's fine."

It was impossible to tell what lay beneath the rubble that had fallen from the roof.

"Could there be more bodies of others buried in there? What's the search situation?"

"Ah… We've already recovered all the bodies. The collapse on this side happened in the morning."

"I see."

Looking at the twisted frame of the collapsed roof, Ellen could tell that the knight's warning about potential further collapses was true. With the snow continuing to pile up, the church might give way under the weight.

Ellen was certain that the knight's claim of a bandit attack was either a lie or spoken in complete ignorance of the true facts.

The assumption that they couldn't resist armed civilians was wrong. The attackers must not have been civilians.

The sequence of events was murder, arson, and looting.

Ellen's conjecture was that the perpetrators at the murder stage were not bandits.

Then why?

What was the attackers' motive for assaulting this place?

Obviously, there had to be some significance to this location.

But what meaning and value could this not-so-large church hold? Though burned down, Ellen couldn't find anything of great value in the church.

If the attack wasn't simply the work of bandits consumed by rage, there had to be a reason.

A reasonable cause and basis.

However, the knights seemed to be deliberately withholding information.

All the corpses had been recovered, so any meaningful clues Ellen could find, aside from the bloodstains on the walls, had likely already been destroyed.

Ellen recalled what Louise had said.

Three stages of the incident.

Murder, arson, and looting.

Murder was the first, and it was certain that they were not civilians. The original goal was probably not looting, but killing the priests.

Looting was the last, and the onlookers at the fire scene were merely transformed into looters. Then, the looters were unrelated to the true core of the incident.

Louise had suggested that the three events could have been committed by different individuals.

This was not a simple case of enraged people causing chaos.

Looting was a natural occurrence as some valuable items might be too precious to burn in the fire. So, the looting was incidental, and the core of the incident was murder.

Why was the church attacked?

There must have been a valid reason.

There had to be something more than met the eye.

The second stage was arson.

Why was arson necessary?

It must have been necessary as well.

Why was arson necessary?

The result of the arson.

Ellen looked at the collapsing church.

Did they need to burn something?

Or, did they need to cause a collapse?

It was hard to tell.

Ellen was sure of one thing.

This church was definitely not an ordinary one.

"What was this church for?" Ellen asked.

The knight cocked his head as if he didn't understand her question.

"Excuse me? This was the church of Tu'an, dedicated to the Goddess of Purity, Tu'an."

"…"

It was impossible to tell whether the knight truly didn't know or was just pretending not to know.

Ellen looked around.

"Ellen."

And then, the previously silent Ludwig called out to Ellen.

"Yeah?"

"Doesn't it… smell?"

At Ludwig's words, Ellen fell silent for a moment.

There was undoubtedly a suspicious scent.

She couldn't tell whether the knights were hiding the truth even though they knew it or whether they were trying to send Ellen away because it was truly dangerous.

Ellen knew Ludwig wasn't confident in using his head, but even Ludwig found it suspicious.

Anyone could see that the scene was suspicious.

No.

A smell?

Ellen looked at Ludwig.

The sight of Ludwig twitching his nose.

He wasn't sensing a suspicious scent; he was actually smelling something.

"…"

As expected, this fool had taken the phrase "smelling something fishy" quite literally.

Indeed, there was an actual smell. The scent of burning was unbearable at the scene of the fire, and Ellen was doing her best to breathe as little as possible.

"What smell?"

"It's… a foul smell…"

A foul smell.

The burning scent was noticeable, but the foul smell seemed out of place.

The overwhelming scent of burning permeated the surroundings.

But mixed within it, there was something else.

Subtle yet undeniably present.

A foul smell invading their nostrils.

To be precise,

"It smells like excrement."

"Really…?"

The smell of feces and urine, in other words, the smell of waste.

"There's also the scent of blood mixed in."

A pungent blood scent could be detected from somewhere.

It could be a smell emanating from the remains of the dead, but the scent detected by

Ludwig and Ellen was not that of a typical scene.

It was a very strong scent.

It hadn't been swept away by the flames or buried; it was definitely a smell that was seeping out from somewhere.

Ludwig couldn't help but focus on that scent.

The smell of waste and blood.

It was a smell they had experienced far too many times throughout countless battlefields.

A scent all too familiar to Ellen and Ludwig.

And the source of that smell.

Ellen rolled up her sleeves.

"Ludwig."

"Yeah?"

"Help me clear away the debris."

"Ah, sure! Got it!"

"Um, Hero…!"

A knight, who seemed determined not to help, blocked Ellen's path.

"One more useless comment, and…"

Ellen lifted her robe, tapping the sword hanging on her waist with her fingertips.

She pointed at the Sword of Moonlight the Void Sword Lament.

"You're in for quite a sight."

Ellen's patience was wearing thin.

The knights, who had been guarding their surroundings, grew increasingly anxious as Ellen and Ludwig unexpectedly began clearing the debris of the collapsed building.

Fortunately, the building's outer walls remained intact, preventing anyone outside from seeing Ellen and Ludwig as they cleared the debris.

Clearing the piled-up snow and the mound of stones as large as a house was a simple task for Ludwig and Ellen.

After lifting only a few stones, both Ellen and Ludwig were certain.

The pungent smell of blood and waste was becoming stronger from within.

There was something under the debris.

Others watched Ellen and Ludwig's actions, but no daring knights tried to stop them.

Unable to dissuade them or offer help, the knights could only watch as Ellen cleared the debris.

After some time spent clearing the debris,

"There was an underground area."

“…Indeed."

The space that had been hidden beneath the collapsed building's debris.

Within it, Ellen and Ludwig could see stairs leading down to the underground.

And unmistakably, the smell of waste and blood was flowing from the underground stairs.

Ellen stared at the pale-faced knights.

"Don't follow us, don't go anywhere, just wait here."

It was a stern warning for those who had tried to deceive her, implying they should be prepared for whatever she might discover.

"Let's go."

"Right."

Ellen led the way, with Ludwig following close behind.

CHAPTER 589

The staircase leading underground was not very long. As they descended through the entrance buried in debris, the stench grew increasingly unbearable, and the pungent smell of blood intensified.

"What on earth could be down here…"

Ellen, tense, pushed open the door leading into the church's underground chambers.

In the darkness, the Sun's Cloak draped itself over Ellen's shoulders, and soon, the blazing flames spewing from the cloak repelled the darkness.

As the darkness receded, a long hallway appeared, with rooms scattered here and there.

The underground had not been affected by the fire.

However, corpses were strewn throughout the hallway, either undiscovered or not yet cleared away.

"Even down here…"

Ludwig stared blankly at the hallway, his eyes wide.

There was a hidden space within the church.

The stench rising from the ground was from the blood and filth of the corpses.

"It seems the attackers' main goal was to kill the people here."

Unlike the disheartened Ludwig, Ellen calmly walked down the hallway.

What did this church and the dead people underground signify?

'From the start, this seems to be the true purpose of this place… '

While there weren't too many people, it wasn't a small number either.

Ellen walked through the underground hallway, examining the rooms as she went.

There were spaces that looked like dining halls, storerooms, and bedrooms.

'The surface was a front, and the underground was the reality. There were more people living here than I had heard… '

Ellen's eyes spotted scattered weapons, like swords and spears, throughout the area.

'The remnants of a battle, not a massacre… '

'The attackers fought with the people who were underground.'

However, the crucial issue was that they couldn't tell which corpses belonged to the attackers and which were the victims. Not a single person was wearing priestly garments.

There was another staircase leading further down.

And the stench continued to rise from below.

Though Ludwig wasn't scared, the fact that more people had died and that the church was operating for a completely different purpose than its outward appearance made him more confused.

Ellen reached the second underground floor.

"What is this… what on earth…?"

Ludwig mumbled, his face pale and vacant.

Ellen gazed at the vast space and murmured to herself.

"A prison, perhaps."

At a glance, the area appeared to be a large-scale detention facility with iron bars.

The prisoners were dead, hanging on the walls.

'The cause of death is a puncture wound… They were impaled by a weapon like a spear.'

Ellen walked around the second underground floor, visually examining the corpses behind the iron bars.

'All the other corpses have the same cause of death. That means they were killed from outside the bars by stabbing them with a spear… It's likely they were executed.'

'Considering the scars on each corpse, it's clear they were not only imprisoned but also tortured. There are quite a few rooms that look like torture chambers as well.'

'Imprisonment, and torture.'

'Did the attackers come to rescue the people who were locked up?'

'If that was their objective, then these people weren't killed by the attackers, but by the people who were in the church's underground.'

'Whether the rescue was the goal or not isn't certain, but the rescue attempt failed, that's for sure.'

"Who are these people, and why have they been imprisoned here?"

"Ellen…"

Ludwig's distraught voice interrupted Ellen's thoughts.

Ludwig, who had called Ellen, was standing in front of a cell, staring blankly inside.

"I… I saw this person yesterday."

"What?"

At his words, Ellen approached Ludwig's side.

A mysterious prisoner, dead from impalement on the cell's bars. However, Ellen had no idea who the person in front of her was.

Ludwig's eyes were trembling intensely.

"Yesterday… Among the people who tried to ambush me and the priestess… this person was there. I'm sure of it…"

"They tried to ambush you?"

Ludwig nodded.

He briefly explained the situation from yesterday.

There was a commotion during the purification work due to a heretic issue, and Rowan, who had shown slightly irrational behavior upon seeing them. However, she gave up attacking when she realized they were hero priests.

On their way back after completing the purification work, the hero priests attempted to ambush Ludwig and Rowan. Ludwig escaped with Rowan in tow.

One of those attackers was now dead and imprisoned.

"I thought we had left those people alone…"

"In reality, they captured them from the refugee camp… That must be the situation."

In front of Rowan's death, an enraged Ludwig sought Ellen's help.

However, by now it was almost certain that Rowan was far from a good person.

It was unclear if all the prisoners were the same, but there was a high possibility they were heretics.

And Rowan's demeanor, which appeared to have momentarily lost her sanity upon seeing the heretics.

The torture chamber.

Now, Ludwig couldn't help but know what this place was and who Rowan had been.

"Could it be… This place… And the priestess was…"

Ludwig mumbled blankly, and Ellen, quietly observing the prison, spoke briefly.

"She must have been an Inquisitor."

"…"

There was no doubt that this place was where heretics were interrogated, tortured, and re-educated.

Then, Archbishop Rowan must have been a priestess corresponding to the leader of the Inquisitors.

With his eyes wide open, Ludwig couldn't help but be soaked in feelings of betrayal and humiliation.

It was almost certain that she had captured heretics from the refugee camp and tortured them.

Ellen wasn't unaffected by the shock, but because of it, she searched the underground prison even more diligently.

The prison wasn't only composed of cells and torture chambers. Ellen examined the dead bodies, checking for any peculiarities on their corpses.

Seeing their emaciated forms, she realized they were residents of the refugee camp.

'To have the power to conduct heretic interrogations and the combat power to protect this place… '

It was a matter of attacking the Inquisitors' base.

It wasn't just a simple band of thugs; it was definitely not an ordinary group.

'They attacked to rescue the people, but they had already been killed to silence them. And the entrance to the underground being blocked due to a collapse… It's still uncertain who did it.'

The attackers assaulted the Inquisitors' base, killed all the people inside, and then vanished after killing the Inquisitors.

'Anyway, the entrance to the underground being blocked by debris is more likely to have happened before the arrival of guards or looters.'

A fire broke out, and guards were deployed.

The guards had failed to comprehend this space, which likely meant that the entrance to the underground had been blocked from the beginning.

Before anyone could discover the scene that was not meant to be seen, the Holy Knights were deployed and took over jurisdiction from the guards.

'Preventing me from entering must have been to stop me from seeing what they're doing here… '

No matter how much it was a heretic inquisition, the sight of capturing civilians, torturing, and killing them was appalling. If Ellen saw this, it was inevitable that something uncontrollable would happen.

However, they couldn't stop Ellen's steps either, so they reluctantly opened the way for her.

Ellen passed the prison cells and torture chambers, heading towards the deepest room.

"Ellen…”

"Yes, I'm listening."

"If they are heretic inquisitors… they'd be similar to the Holy Knights, right? They'd have to fight."

"I don't know for sure, but I guess so."

It wasn't strictly necessary, but since heretics could wield dangerous powers, the heretic inquisitors would likely need practical combat skills.

"Then… it's clear that Rowan must be a high-ranking person among the heretic inquisitors."

"She must have been."

"Then wouldn't Rowan… actually be a person who could fight?"

The leader of the heretic inquisitors.

They would likely need actual combat power.

Of course, it wasn't a given. Those who sat in the Pope's position in the Five Great Church had tremendous divine power at their disposal, but they didn't necessarily have to be Holy Knights.

"It's possible, but she was directly involved in external activities, so she must have been."

However, Rowan was on the front lines. So, she must have had exceptional combat skills. Perhaps even better than Ludwig.

“…Why did she need protection?"

Ludwig couldn't help but feel confused, and Ellen couldn't help but consider Ludwig's doubts valid.

"If she's a heretic inquisitor, she should be able to fight, and if she's wandering through the refugee camp to gather information or intelligence on heretics, there's no reason for her to receive protection from the guards. It would be more convenient for her to move alone. It doesn't make sense."

"Why did she do that?"

"I don't know. Not yet."

It was undoubtedly strange.

It couldn't be ruled out that Rowan genuinely lacked combat abilities, but it would be strange for the leader of the heretic inquisitors who engaged in fieldwork to lack them.

Ellen passed the prison and arrived at the end of another corridor.

When she opened the door there, Ellen saw a desk, chair, and bookshelf inside.

The space was unmistakably that of a person in charge.

The bookshelf was tightly packed with books related to the Holy Church and theology, and Ellen approached the table.

A few documents were scattered around, but most of them were encrypted, so Ellen couldn't understand their meaning.

It was natural for all the documents dealing with classified information to be encrypted.

However.

There.

Ellen found one document she could read.

"!"

It wasn't that she had deciphered the document.

Ellen carefully picked up the single sheet of paper.

"Did you find something?"

Ellen handed the document to Ludwig, who couldn't help but widen his eyes.

Although they couldn't understand the encrypted documents, there was one they could.

The photograph contained in that document.

"My face… Why is it here?"

There was a photograph of Ludwig.

"I can't read the content, but it's clear that this document contains your personal information."

Just because they couldn't read it didn't mean they couldn't deduce its content.

"She didn't need a bodyguard."

Ellen looked at Ludwig.

"I don't know the reason, but it seems like she approached you from the start."

It was evident that Rowan had deliberately approached Ludwig.

For now, Ellen put the document away.

In the Tu'an church, the crumbling facade hid a place where people were imprisoned and tortured underground.

The stronghold of the Inquisitors.

The hidden side of the church could be seen.

Most of the Inquisitors were slaughtered by unidentified assailants.

A fire broke out, and after the fire, looters ransacked the church.

The entrance to the underground was blocked by a collapse after the fire, which was an intentional act.

Ludwig was devastated to learn that Rowan had been orchestrating such horrific events.

Their business was done.

Ellen took the dumbstruck Ludwig and returned to the surface.

As Ellen had ordered, the Holy Knights were unable to enter or leave the area.

The Holy Knights were supposed to prevent Ellen from witnessing this scene, but they couldn't stop her.

Ellen didn't know whether these people were involved with the Inquisition or not. However, they must have known what kind of place this was, which was why they had tried to stop Ellen.

In this situation, they wouldn't have any excuses if their throats were to be slit by the enraged hero's sword.

Without uttering a word, the Holy Knights awaited the hero's judgment.

"The number of priests is lacking, you said."

Ellen neither judged nor interrogated them.

In any case, the likelihood of them knowing the specifics was low.

"It seems there are enough priests to take part in killing people."

Ellen merely spoke those words as she passed by them.

CHAPTER 590

Ellen and Ludwig got out of the burned church.

"They'll know I went in there, and the Holy Knights will find out. They won't be able to touch me, but they might try to silence you."

"…"

"Stay away from the church for a while."

"…Alright."

Ludwig was in a daze.

While helping Rowan, Ludwig had discovered a small glimmer of hope that he could do something.

But Rowan turned out to be a heretic inquisitor who gathered information in the refugee village and kidnapped and tortured heretics. And for some reason, she had deliberately approached Ludwig.

From the start, Rowan didn't need Ludwig's protection. She had intended to use Ludwig in some way, and she did.

Only then did Ludwig understand the strange behavior Rowan had shown when she saw heretics. It was because she was a heretic inquisitor.

The purification work Rowan claimed to have done might have been a lie from the beginning.

"It took a while."

"Yes."

Ellen and Ludwig joined Heinrich and Louise, who had been waiting in the alley.

“…You both look like you've discovered something you shouldn't have."

Louise sensed that something significant had happened just by looking at their expressions, without hearing any details.

In Heinrich's case, it might be different, but Louise was both the commander of the Kernstadt army and the first in line for the Kernstadt throne.

Ellen hesitated for a moment, wondering whether she should tell such a person about something that could be considered a scandal involving the Holy Knights. But she found her hesitation strange.

Although she was bound to be involved in everything related to politics, Ellen had no interest in it. She knew that responsibility came with her position, but maintaining excessive neutrality was itself political.

Moreover, Louise was more aware of her position's importance than Ellen, and she had come here not as the commander of Kernstadt but simply to help Ludwig.

So Ellen revealed to Louise and Heinrich what she had learned at the church.

It had been a heretic inquisition disguised as a dilapidated church, with a vast underground prison and torture chamber beneath the church, and everyone inside was dead.

"Heretic inquisition?"

Heinrich's face turned pale upon hearing the story.

"It seems they were torturing and killing people."

Then Ellen shared another equally important fact.

There were documents with Ludwig's photo in what appeared to be Rowan's office.

"Did Rowan deliberately approach Ludwig…? But why?"

"I still don't know."

Rowan was a heretic inquisitor.

She had deliberately approached Ludwig, intending to use her in some way.

Heinrich couldn't help but feel bitter as he looked at the stunned Ludwig. Ludwig had been improving over the past few days, but now he would be more devastated than ever.

He had been used without even realizing it, happily thinking that he still had a role to play.

Moreover, Rowan had kidnapped, tortured, and killed heretics she had learned about while visiting the refugee village with Ludwig.

"It's strange."

Louise, who had been quietly listening to the story, furrowed her brow and spoke softly.

"What's the connection between the heretic inquisition and using Ludwig?"

It was a context that no one present could possibly understand. Ludwig was not a follower of the Five Great Gods, nor did he believe in the Hero Religion. He was initially unrelated to heresy.

"Come to think of it…"

Ludwig mumbled absentmindedly.

"She did ask about Ellen…"

"Me…?"

Ellen cocked her head at the remark, and Ludwig nodded.

"That person seemed to really dislike the Hero Religion. And she asked what kind of person you were. Then, after hearing that I attended the Temple… she asked what kind of being the Demon King was."

As Rowan unexpectedly mentioned herself, Ellen's expression couldn't help but grow

more serious.

"Could it be… they were trying to approach you through Ludwig?"

"It's possible."

To Louise's question, Ellen quietly nodded. Louise furrowed her brow, biting her lip as if it made even less sense.

"I don't know what you think about the Hero Religion, but… isn't it unrelated to you directly?"

"Yes."

The Hero Religion was a spontaneously formed folk belief, existing independently of the will of Ellen Artorius, who could be considered its object of worship.

"The heretical inquisitors would have wanted to eliminate the Hero Religion… So, were they trying to approach and harm you through Ludwig?"

Hearing that Rowan might have reached Ellen through him and possibly attempted to kill her, Ludwig's eyes widened in shock.

"No way… There's no way that could be…"

"Even though the Hero Religion has nothing to do with me, if I die, it will disappear. They might have thought that way."

At Ellen's explanation, Ludwig's face grew even paler.

If the focus of the Hero Religion, Ellen, were to die, the faith would collapse. Although it was a naturally occurring folk belief, without Ellen, the Hero Religion would inevitably disappear.

The Hero Religion would seek another belief. They would either return to the embrace of the Five Great Gods or search for a new faith.

They didn't love Ellen, only the hope she represented. All they needed was someone to provide that hope.

Ludwig murmured quietly.

“…Come to think of it, she said something like that."

"What did she say?"

Ludwig had said he didn't know much about the Demon King, and that Ellen seemed like a victim.

And then.

"When I said Ellen seemed like the victim of all this… she asked if I knew that for sure…”

Undoubtedly, she had said this with a strange, enigmatic smile.

It wasn't that she didn't know; it was as if she had different knowledge.

"It felt like she was mocking me, as if the truth I know is somehow different… as if she was laughing at something…”

At Ludwig's words, Ellen lost her own.

Louise silently watched Ellen, who looked as if she had heard something shocking, her eyes wide open.

The others did not notice the conversation between Ludwig and Ellen.

Through that brief exchange, Ellen realized a truth.

'They knew why and how the Gate Incident happened.'

That's why they laughed when Ludwig said Ellen was a victim.

Ellen had never seen Rowan's face. But Rowan knew a truth that Ludwig, who was close to Ellen and could meet her anytime, didn't.

And that was both amusing and pitiful to her.

And so, that was what had been said.

"To get rid of the Hero Religion, it could be that Rowan approached Ellen… It seems plausible."

At Heinrich's words, Ellen felt the urge to bite her tongue.

'No… That's not it.'

She couldn't bring herself to say it out loud, but Ellen felt like she knew what Rowan was thinking.

'She wanted to take revenge… on me.'

Having been one of the causes of the Gate Incident, she received the adoration of many people while shifting all the blame onto the Demon King and claiming herself as a hero.

Those who believed in the Hero Religion treated those who believed in the Five Great Religions as sinners and only praised Ellen.

How disgusting and hateful that must have been.

Ellen's death causing the Hero Religion to disappear was probably a secondary matter.

Rowan had also asked not only about Ellen but about what kind of being the Demon King was.

That meant that if Rowan knew the truth, she might have even supported the Demon King.

She was a priestess of the Tu'an.

So, if she knew that the Demon King, the master of Tiamata, did not actually want the Gate Incident and had even warned against it, she would naturally have no choice but to support the Demon King.

Conversely, she would have no choice but to hate and despise Ellen.

Knowing this, Ellen could not dare to open her mouth, her face hardening like stone.

Ludwig, too, could not help but be even more shocked when he realized the possibility that Rowan might have tried to approach Ellen using him.

Being close to a special being made one special as well, but Ludwig could not help but realize that it also meant that there was always the possibility of being used, regardless of one's own worth.

"Rowan, the heretic inquisitor, and all the other inquisitors under her command are dead, so whatever their goal was, it's now impossible… But that doesn't mean everything is resolved."

Louise looked at Ellen.

"Who exactly attacked the church? Is it okay not to clarify that?"

No matter what Rowan's intentions had been, there were too many unsettling aspects to simply move on now that she was dead.

The idea that Rowan might have tried to kill Ellen was merely conjecture.

"To begin with, there's something strange even if the heretic inquisitor did try to kill you."

"Strange… aspect?"

"What does torturing and kidnapping Hero Religion followers have to do with you?"

"Ah…"

Only then did Ellen realize that she had been too shocked by the possibility that Rowan might have known the truth to think about what the events that had already taken place meant.

"Not all zealots and madmen are fools. It's obvious that the rise of the Hero Religion has nothing to do with you. Were there clear signs of torture?"

"There was a torture chamber, and the corpses showed signs of having been tortured."

At Ellen's words, Louise slowly nodded.

"Torture might be used simply to inflict pain, but its basic purpose is to obtain information."

Louise said.

"What kind of information about you could they obtain by torturing people who had never seen you even once in their lives or, at most, had seen you from afar?"

That was undoubtedly strange.

If Rowan had approached Ludwig to kill Ellen, then it was highly likely that the torture of the Hero Religion followers was also carried out for that purpose.

But no matter how much they tortured the Hero Religion followers, they wouldn't know anything about Ellen. They couldn't have been unaware of that.

"Perhaps they intended to force them to convert…"

"Youngest. It's impossible to force all the Heroic Disciples to convert through torture."

"I-I see…"

"They might have thought that killing the Hero would be the only way to end the Hero Religion. But they couldn't have not realized that trying to kill the Hero in this situation is madness… I don't know."

It was either the act of a fanatic or there was some other intention. Ultimately, they were lost in a labyrinth.

It was possible to deduce Rowan's objective through clues, but nothing could be confirmed.

This was originally Ludwig's issue.

However, as the case was investigated, the likelihood of it being Ellen's issue increased significantly.

Rowan's true objective remained unknown. They couldn't even figure out who attacked the church.

But if Ellen were to delve deeper into this matter, it would inevitably become dangerous.

"Whether it's the Holy Knights or the Five Great Religious Orders, they must know about this. It couldn't have been done by that priest alone. And I can't be certain if that person really intended to kill me. This is just a possibility."

"I suppose so."

Ellen spoke calmly.

"From here on, I'll handle it alone. It's my own problem."

It was a political issue, and it was dangerous.

She couldn't receive help from Louise, Heinrich, or Ludwig.

Louise stared at Ellen's determined expression.

A person who had to shoulder too much at a young age and didn't hesitate to do so.

Ludwig's words about her being the victim in all cases.

And now, her attitude of wanting to take responsibility alone, no matter what was in front of her.

Louise knew she shouldn't get involved in this matter any further.

But she couldn't help but feel sorry for Ellen's resolute attitude, which meant that she had to take responsibility for everything, whether she had the will to or not.

A problem of her own.

Louise thought about Ellen's sad words.

"A problem of your own."

Louise smirked.

For someone who had to shoulder so much, even the smallest issue was inevitably connected to many things.

What about being royalty or the heir?

In a situation where the Hero's death could lead to humanity's demise, the Hero is about to get involved in dangerous matters.

"Your problem is everyone's problem."

"…"

If Ellen's death were to ruin everything in the world…

Then everything on Louise's shoulders would become insignificant in front of Ellen's life.

Ellen couldn't help but feel suffocated in front of Louise's offer to help her till the end.

Even as a heresy inquisitor, she was still part of the Holy Knights or one of the Five Great Religious Orders. Thus, the place Ellen had to go to find out more about Rowan was as good as predetermined.

The Holy Knights' cathedral.

Louise, Heinrich, and Ludwig also moved with Ellen.

Ludwig had originally asked Ellen to reveal the unjust death of Rowan, but in reality, Rowan had been the mastermind behind countless unjust deaths.

In fact, the current situation suggested that the attackers who killed Rowan might have been acting righteously.

Rowan was not a victim of injustice.

Ludwig had never even considered doubting Rowan's mask until now.

No, he had been watching the suspicious behavior all along.

However, it's possible that he couldn't bring himself to doubt it because he believed that being with Rowan meant he could do something.

He didn't know what to do, but driven by his frustration, Ludwig wanted to see this matter through to the end.

He wanted to know the true extent of this issue and where its roots lie.

What on earth was happening?

Just as Ellen wanted to know, Ludwig also yearned for that knowledge. Even though he knew that finding out would only increase his frustration rather than bring relief.

Did Rowan truly intend to kill Ellen?

What was the reason for torturing the Hero Religion believers?

Did the Holy Knights know about this?

Just as Ellen had been able to infiltrate the attack site guarded by the Holy Knights, there was no difference when it came to the Holy Knights' headquarters, the cathedral.

"I want to meet the commander of the Holy Knights."

That single statement was enough.

CHAPTER 591

Holy Knight Commander Eleion Bolton.

After the previous Holy Knight Commander, Riverrier Lanze, stepped down from his position due to the atrocities he committed against his daughter Olivia Lanze, Eleion became his successor.

Although he was a pro-empire figure, this was only in comparison to Riverrier Lanze, and it didn't mean that he was completely loyal to the empire.

Riverrier Lanze had dreamt of establishing a Holy Empire by completely separating the Holy Knights and the Five Great Religions' forces from the Empire. He had intended to establish his daughter as the first Holy Emperor of this new empire.

He dreamt of an empire of gods, led by a Holy Emperor who would rule over the five popes of the Great Holy Religions, each representing one of the factions.

Of course, very few knew about his ambition, and he had no choice but to put an end to his long-cherished dream when he was killed by the Demon King.

Compared to Riverrier Lanze, Eleion Bolton was a moderate figure.

He believed that maintaining the current status quo with the power and resources at hand was the best course of action. As such, he was someone who could easily appeal to the existing factions.

He had successfully led the Holy Knights since the Gate Incident, and the fact that the Holy Knights still remained strong was proof of Eleion Bolton's capability to perform his duties as a commander.

Ellen was alone in the meeting room with the Holy Knight Commander.

However, she was not alone in the visit itself, as she was accompanied by her companions.

Ludwig, Heinrich.

And Louise von Schwarz.

The other three entered the reception hall instead of the meeting room and were waiting separately in another room for the meeting to end.

This was Louise's idea.

Ellen asked if it would be better for Louise to wait outside to avoid getting involved in any troublesome disputes, but Louise shook her head.

"I'll come with you, but you'll have the meeting alone."

"Wouldn't it be better if we go to the meeting together? If we're going to be separate, it would be better if they didn't know we were here together."

If they were going together, they should either meet the Holy Knight Commander together, or not let him know they came at all.

Ellen thought that would be better.

She was concerned that coming together like this, but not having the meeting together, might be worse than not coming at all.

"Just the fact that you're not alone puts pressure on the other party."

"The Holy Knight Commander has to take my presence into account because we came together, but I have the excuse of just stopping by the Holy Knights' reception hall with my youngest and his friend."

"They may not believe that excuse, but you don't know how many issues we can avoid with such an obvious reason. What matters is how it appears."

"It will be much easier for you to talk if I'm not there."

"Do you understand what I mean?"

After hearing Louise's explanation, Ellen nodded her head.

"I see. I understand what you're saying."

Just like Ellen said, Louise's presence alone held significance. The Holy Knight Commander might not have a conversation with Louise von Schwarz, but he couldn't help but feel her presence.

Thus, if the Holy Knight Commander were to harbor any ill intentions towards Ellen, he would have to think very seriously before taking any action.

Ellen was not only a hero herself, but also a guest who had come with the heir to the Schwarz royal family.

Hence, deceiving Ellen was tantamount to deceiving both the hero and the Schwarz royal family.

It is known that excessive display of presence can have adverse effects, and Louise knew well how to utilize her presence at an appropriate level.

Thus, Ellen waited alone in the audience chamber, having asked the others in her party to wait in separate rooms.

The reputation of a hero is never to be taken lightly.

For an ordinary person, requesting an audience would be impossible, and even if someone with the right to request an audience arrived, they would have to wait until the Commander of the Holy Knights was finished with their duties.

However, merely because Ellen had come, the Commander of the Holy Knights was obliged to stop his work immediately and go to the audience chamber.

When Ellen said she wanted to see the Commander of the Holy Knights, it was no different from saying she wanted to see him right away.

It took Ellen less than ten minutes to arrive at the Holy Knights' headquarters, reach the audience chamber, and lay eyes on the Commander's face.

Thud

As the door to the audience chamber opened, and Commander Eleion Bolton appeared, Ellen rose from her seat and bowed her head to him.

"Hello."

Seeing Ellen's greeting, Eleion Bolton carefully stroked his neatly trimmed goatee.

"Hmm. I didn't expect to see you here at the Imperial Capital."

"Indeed."

Although Ellen was very polite, her politeness was consistently impartial. When she had met Louise von Schwarz, she had simply greeted her and said nothing more.

She and the emperor had an informal relationship due to their shared past at the temple.

Thus, Ellen was not especially polite to anyone.

Of course, no one in the world would dare point this out, neither in the past nor now.

"Please, have a seat."

"Yes."

At the invitation, Ellen sat down on the sofa, and Eleion Bolton sat opposite her.

The two were quite familiar with each other.

In fact, Ellen had often been on the battlefield with the Commander of the Holy Knights, and although she did not always attend meetings, they had seen each other's faces at such times.

However, it was very rare for them to come all the way to the Imperial Capital and see each other at the Holy Knights' headquarters.

Just before the gate incident erupted.

Ellen had been present the day Olivia Lanze had caused a scene, arguing over what to do about Reinhardt's whereabouts.

If not for that time, it would have been their first encounter.

Ellen was struck by that thought.

Neither then nor now had she been at that place for a good reason.

Although Ellen was polite, she was not one to beat around the bush.

"Do you know why I came here?"

"…"

Eleion Bolton was silent for a moment.

"I received a report that you entered the burned church scene."

"Explain everything from beginning to end. What's what. If you know, tell me, and if you don't, say so."

Ellen spoke calmly, her expression unchanging.

"I didn't expect the hero to come out like this."

Eleion Bolton managed a bitter smile, for there had never been a situation like this before.

"I do what needs to be done."

Ellen knew how to be rude when it was necessary.

"If I won't tell you, what do you intend to do?"

At that, Ellen considered for a moment.

"I'll keep asking until you speak."

Even if she were to lie down here, there was no one in the world who could lay a finger on Ellen.

Even if it were the Commander of the Holy Knights himself.

Ellen half-threatened Eleion Bolton as she demanded the truth from him.

But the answer was simple.

"I don't know."

"…"

Ellen stared at Eleion Bolton, who had given such a blatantly candid response.

"You don't expect me to believe that, do you?"

"I can only say what I know."

Ellen pondered over how to break through his infuriatingly calm lie.

If he consistently claimed ignorance, what was she supposed to do?

"Are you saying that Archbishop Rowan, who was in the church, wasn't a member of the Holy Knights but of the Tu'an Order, and that's why you don't know? Is that what you're saying?"

"No, Archbishop Rowan was a member of the Holy Knights. She was the heresy inquisitor of the Holy Knights and oversaw the heresy inquisitors of the Imperial Capital."

As Ellen had suspected, Archbishop Rowan was indeed the chief inquisitor of heresy.

"So you're saying you didn't know that she was torturing refugees in the church's basement?"

"To be precise, I didn't know until now."

"…Are you playing with words?"

Ellen couldn't fathom where to start pointing out the absurdity of the Holy Knights' commander claiming ignorance of something he should have known.

As Ellen glared at him, Eleion Bolton stared down at the table.

"I suppose I must make excuses for my incompetence."

"Incompetence…?"

"Yes, incompetence."

The Holy Knight commander spoke as he gazed at Ellen.

"As the leader of the Holy Knights in the Allied Forces, I have commanded knights and priests until now, and I have only returned to the Imperial Capital a little over a week ago."

"…"

"Is it so hard to believe that I couldn't help but be ignorant of the circumstances in the Imperial Capital?"

The leader of the Holy Knights had been busy.

Exceedingly busy.

He had been too occupied to pay attention to, let alone know about, the state of the Holy Knights in the Imperial Capital and the situation of the Five Great Religions.

He claimed his incompetence stemmed from not knowing because he wasn't skilled enough to manage it all.

Ellen couldn't deny that, at the very least, Eleion Bolton's words were honest.

The Allied Forces didn't consist solely of Imperial troops. The army was an amalgamation of the remaining forces of countless nations, including the Mage Guild, the Saint Owan Duchy, the Kernstadt Army, and the resources of numerous groups and countries.

Each army was divided, and the direction of the military was determined by the central command.

The Holy Knights were a crucial pillar of the Allied Forces, just as the Kernstadt Army was one of the major backbones.

Like the Emperor being busy or like Commander Louise von Schwarz not being able to leave the Allied Forces until she received command authority from the king.

Eleion Bolton, the leader of the Holy Knights, couldn't leave the Allied Forces' base either.

"I don't know if you'll understand, but the Holy Knights aren't a simple group."

Eleion Bolton spoke with his finger resting on the table.

"The Holy Knights are a coalition of the five religions."

"I know that, of course."

"It means that the Empire was formed by the combination of the five successor nations."

"…"

Although it might sound blasphemous, the meaning was correct. The Holy Knights themselves were akin to a small empire.

"But the leader of the Holy Knights isn't the Emperor."

"…!"

Ellen couldn't help but widen her eyes at his words.

She herself had said the same thing in response to Ludwig's question just a few days ago.

The position of the Holy Knight Commander was above the Chief Inquisitor but below the Pope. At best, it was considered equal to the Pope.

When human nations come together to form an empire, an emperor appears, but when the five Orders come together to elect the Holy Order Commander, it does not result in a being greater than the Pope. It is merely a position that represents and commands the group.

"Do you understand that as the Commander of the Holy Knight, I commanded the United Army of the Holy Order, and therefore, there must be things about the Orders and the Holy Knight that I am not aware of?"

The Holy Knight Commander is a military position, but the five Popes are not. And the Holy Knight Commander has no authority to command the Popes.

If the Popes have something they are hiding from the Holy Knight Commander, it is possible that the Holy Knight Commander may not know.

Not knowing is not ignorance.

Ellen is well aware that it is overwhelming enough to wage war.

Indeed, the Holy Knight Commander could have known nothing at all.

Eleion Bolton could not have known about the situation in the Empire.

This could be because waging war alone was overwhelming, and because the Popes were responsible for the matters of the Empire, there was no obligation to inform Eleion Bolton.

Since the Holy Knight's authority is nominally lower than that of the Popes, there is no reason for the Popes to inform the Holy Knight Commander about the affairs of the Empire, and it is not considered dereliction of duty or anything of the sort.

Eleion Bolton did not say that the Popes were suspicious.

He is saying that it is not strange in the first place for the current Holy Knight Commander not to know the situation in the Imperial Capital. It just left more room for Ellen's imagination.

"I knew that Archbishop Rowan was performing her duties as the chief inquisitor of the Imperial Capital's heretics. But I didn't know she was torturing the heretics."

"And I dispatched the Holy Knights this morning after receiving contact. It's not good for civilians to enter such a place carelessly."

"I ordered the control of the site and the concealment of the underground facilities."

"As I just said, you know the reason."

"But I don't know what Archbishop Rowan was doing."

"I only hid the things that people shouldn't see."

Ellen listened quietly to Eleion Bolton's words.

It was impossible to quietly bury the incident since it had drawn attention due to the fire.

If his words were true, Eleion Bolton had ordered the Holy Knights to deliberately collapse part of the building and bury the stairs leading down to the underground beneath the rubble.

The incident had already occurred, the massacre had taken place, and the fire had started. It was a small blessing that looters did not carelessly enter the underground and become buried alive.

Eleion Bolton did not know about the attackers or why Archbishop Rowan was killed.

In a situation where the crime scene itself had to be cleaned up and the truth had to be uncovered, Eleion Bolton had simply done so.

The Holy Knights at the scene also knew that the place was a church of the heretical inquisitors, but they did not know what had happened there.

If word got out that people had been captured and tortured in the church's underground, the already volatile public sentiment in the Imperial Capital would worsen. That's why Eleion Bolton had no choice but to clean up the situation belatedly.

And it was Ellen who had gone directly to the scene to assess the situation.

Eleion Bolton did not know what Rowan was doing. It was already overwhelming for him to come back to the Imperial Capital and grasp the situation.

"Do you really not know anything?"

"I don't know, but I can try to guess."

Eleion Bolton looked at Ellend quietly.

He was supposed to be at the Allied Army's camp, but he hadn't simply returned.

"Recently, the cemetery in the Holy Order's underground was robbed."

Although only a very few people knew about it, Ellen had overheard and was aware of the matter. It was a major incident, but she had forgotten it since it was unrelated to her.

"Could it be that incident…?"

"Yes."

Eleion Bolton nodded.

"She must have been investigating that matter."

Since the Holy Knight Commander of the Holy Order had returned to the Imperial Capital to investigate it, it was clear that the heretical inquisitors who had remained in the Imperial Capital were also investigating the matter.

For other factions or individuals, such an incident might be dismissible, but for the involved party, it was a major accident that could not simply be overlooked.

"Was it the refugees who robbed the cemetery… Is that what you're saying?"

At Ellen's words, Eleion Bolton shook his head with a stern expression.

"I can't know that for sure. And there are no treasures buried in the tombs of the saints."

Eleion Bolton spoke as he looked at Ellend.

"Because what was stolen was not treasure, but the remains."

“…Pardon?"

Naturally, there was no way Ellen could know the truth.

CHAPTER 592

Ellen had heard from someone on the High Command side that the Holy Knights' graveyard had been plundered. Naturally, she also knew that the leader of the Holy Knights and the high-ranking knights had returned to investigate the matter.

Since a considerable amount of military power was concentrated in the Allied Forces, it was inevitable that the security of the Holy Knights' mausoleum would become vulnerable. The occurrence of the plundering itself was not considered impossible.

However, she didn't know that the stolen items were human remains.

"Why…?"

Ellen couldn't understand it.

"I don't know either. But many of the graves were destroyed, and the remains inside had all disappeared."

Eleion Bolton was just as puzzled.

"It's natural that Archbishop Rowan would want to investigate this. But I never thought her method would involve capturing and torturing heretics."

Eleion Bolton stared quietly at the table.

"I also returned to the Imperial Capital and continued to look into the matter. It could be a dissatisfied faction within, or something I'm unaware of, so I'm being cautious in my actions."

Who had secretly entered the saints' graveyard and stolen the remains? The reason, the method, and the culprit were all unknown.

And it was clear that the leader of the Holy Knights couldn't properly get to the bottom of the incident because he couldn't trust those who had remained in the Imperial Capital.

"What does this have to do with the people in the refugee camp?"

"If you think that the Inquisitors' job is to arrest, torture, and kill innocent people, then it can't be helped. But the Inquisitors are the ones who see the most manifestations of the cursed rituals performed by heretics."

"…"

They had witnessed countless demonic deeds performed by heretics and the impure miracles they caused.

So it was an occupational hazard to think that heretics were the cause of such problems.

"One cannot absolutely rule out the possibility that the heretics' curses and prayers have defiled the saints' tombs."

The leader of the Holy Knights couldn't say for sure that the heretic rituals in the refugee camp were not the cause.

In reality, a massive refugee camp had formed in the Imperial Capital, and many of them were followers of the Hero Religion or believed in a distorted form of the religion. It was impossible to say that none of their impure rituals or prayers had brought impurity to the saints' mausoleums.

"Is such a thing really possible?"

At Ellen's question, Eleion Bolton neither nodded nor shook his head.

"It could be possible."

The leader of the Holy Knights didn't know what Rowan had been doing so far.

But he knew that Rowan had been looking into the graveyard robbery because of the situation in the Holy Knights.

Then came an even stranger question.

'Why on earth would Ludwig…?'

Ellen thought that Rowan might have approached Ludwig to get close to her.

But what did Ludwig have to do with it if Rowan was investigating the graveyard robbery?

If Ludwig's involvement and the purpose of the graveyard robbery were different, it could be possible.

But was that really the case?

And there was another problem.

"Did Rowan know why the Gate incident happened?"

Judging by the circumstances and recalling what she had said to Ludwig, Rowan seemed to know the reason behind the Gate incident.

Upon Ellen's inquiry, Eleion Bolton gazed silently at her.

"Do you remember that day?"

Of course, Ellen knew which day he was referring to.

The day the sky opened, and meteors rained down.

The day this entire nightmare began.

"Do you remember the people who were there?"

“…Yes."

Many people had gathered at that place.

The last moment when they questioned the Demon King about his intentions and desires.

The Demon King spoke there.

He said he loved humans and wanted to save them.

But they did not trust him, and it was already too late, so he told them about the events that would unfold.

The people who had gathered to interrogate the Demon King that day.

The Emperor and the Crown Prince.

Ellen and Saviolin Turner, the leader of the Holy Knights, and the popes of the five major churches.

And those who had gathered to prepare for any contingencies.

The Royal Mage Corps.

Shanafel.

The high-ranking holy knights of the Holy Knight Order.

"Archbishop Rowan was there too."

Rowan was one of the people present when the Demon King made his final plea.

He had given up on everything and surrendered.

He said he loved humans and wanted peace, but they did not believe him.

Rowan was a witness to the Demon King's despair as he made his confession with a miserable expression, having given up on everything.

Archbishop Rowan, the leader of the inquisitors, had watched as the apostle of Tu'an, in despair, fell apart before her eyes.

Rowan had been a priestess of Tu'an.

On the day the sky opened, many people had gathered in the great hall. There were royal mages, knights from Shanafel, and high-ranking holy knights of the Holy Knight Order.

Many of them had become unwelcome guests after the Gate incident, but there were survivors. Rowan was one of them.

They didn't know much about the Demon King, but they had witnessed firsthand his prediction of the Gate incident and his discussion of how to stop it.

All of them harbored secrets about the truth that must not be revealed, but in the end, they were all human.

They couldn't help but agonize and suffer over why these things had to happen and what the problem was.

Upon hearing that the murdered Rowan had been one of the people present that day, Ellen could only stand there, dumbfounded.

She had been close to the Demon King at that gathering.

Rowan would have watched the scene from a distance. She was one of the holy knights guarding the area in case of an attack.

She had heard the Demon King's confession.

Many people believed that the Gate incident was an act perpetrated by the Demon King to exterminate humanity.

People hated Tu'an for choosing such a Demon King.

They hated the priests who believed in Tu'an.

They hated the followers who obeyed those priests.

And those who believed in the Hero Religion prospered.

How resentful, sad, and hateful it must have been for those who did not know the truth to spew their hatred and anger.

Ellen realized how natural it was for Rowan to loathe and despise her so fiercely.

But Rowan was dead, regardless of what she wanted or investigated.

It was impossible to know who had killed her.

She didn't even know why she had approached Ludwig.

Louise had told Ellen.

Your mission is for the sake of humanity.

Then, are all matters concerning humanity the responsibility of the hero?

Ellen couldn't help but think that she was responsible not only for suspecting Rowan but also for everything she had gone through.

"Who was it that killed her… you're saying you don't know?"

"…Yes."

The commander of the Holy Knights could only guess at what Rowan had been investigating. He genuinely didn't know what Rowan had intended to do or who had killed her.

It was impossible to trust everything that Eleion Bolton said. There was always a chance that he was withholding information, caught between ignorance, lies, and truth.

"Do you think Rowan was killed while investigating the tomb-raiding incident?"

"Most likely, yes."

The tomb of the saints beneath the Holy Knights' Cathedral had been raided.

Rowan had been investigating the incident and was killed as a result.

That was the only conclusion they could draw at the moment.

Eleion Bolton's claim that he didn't know what Rowan had been doing wasn't entirely without credibility. However, there was no guarantee that everything Eleion Bolton said was true.

In the first place, there was no way Ellen, an outsider—even as a hero—would be welcomed meddling in internal affairs. It was only natural that something would be hidden.

The Holy Knights were more concerned with covering up what had happened in the church than with destroying evidence at the scene. That's why the bodies in the temple's basement remained.

The Holy Knights were in a hurry from the start.

Their plan was to conceal the scene first, then deal with the heretic interrogators and their facilities later.

Naturally, there was no reason for the empire to interfere in the affairs of the Holy Knights.

If Ellen hadn't suddenly burst into the scene, the incident would have been wrapped up as a robbery and arson attack by bandits on the church.

It was the Holy Knights, following Eleion Bolton's orders, who had concealed the scene.

But Eleion Bolton claimed that he had never ordered Rowan to interrogate heretics. The truth of that claim aside, it wasn't entirely unbelievable.

Eleion Bolton had no way of knowing the situation in the Imperial Capital until he returned. It was clear that he was also spending time assessing the situation.

Ellen pondered.

Did Eleion Bolton know that Rowan had intentionally approached Ludwig?

Looking at the situation, Eleion Bolton seemed to be focused on concealing the scene.

It was clear that he hadn't checked the contents of the documents in the church or known that Rowan had intentionally approached Ludwig.

He had likely planned to learn about that matter step by step during the cover-up and cleanup process.

And Ellen now had the document with Ludwig's face on it.

Wondering whether to reveal this information, Ellen soon made a decision.

Eleion Bolton could not yet be trusted.

And he wouldn't trust Ellen either, so they were on equal footing in their mutual distrust.

"May I look into this matter myself?"

If he insisted that she shouldn't interfere, it would arouse Ellen's suspicions.

Ellen didn't have explicitly stated powers, like the authority to investigate.

However, because it wasn't explicitly stated, Ellen could interfere in any matter.

Her ability to meddle in the affairs of the Holy Knights—which even the emperor couldn't touch—was proof of that.

In a way, Ellen possessed the most transcendent power. She didn't know what Eleion Bolton was thinking.

All she knew was that he couldn't refuse her.

"I'll cooperate fully, within the limits of the authority of the Holy Knights' Commander."

Within the limits of the authority of the Holy Knights' Commander.

Ellen understood exactly what that meant.

After the meeting with the Holy Knights' Commander, Ellen returned to the place where her companions were waiting.

Ellen had received a promise that the Holy Knights' Commander would cooperate fully. However, he didn't mention the Princess of the Schwarz royal family at all.

Whether it meant to handle the matter on her own or that it would be fine if Louise got involved in the case, it was unclear.

The Holy Knights' Commander, however, had to resolve the graveyard robbery case.

Just as Rowan had solved the case in his own way, it wouldn't be bad if Ellen resolved it herself.

It was ambiguous whether Eleion Bolton genuinely didn't know or was deliberately withholding information.

Nonetheless, the claim that he had no choice but to be ignorant of the situation on the Imperial Capital was not unconvincing.

Ellen didn't explicitly mention that Rowan was one of the few who knew the truth about the Gate incident.

Guilt-ridden as she was, some truths had to be kept hidden.

Just as Eleion Bolton had crushed the path leading down to the inquisition facility in the underground church, Ellen was also someone who had no choice but to do similar things.

"The graveyard was robbed, and the missing items are the remains?"

"Yes."

"But why…?"

"I don't know either."

The three of them couldn't help but be surprised by what they had heard about the case Rowan was presumed to be investigating.

If treasures had disappeared, greed would have been the motive. However, if remains were missing, the likelihood of being involved in a malicious act increased.

That's why it was natural for Rowan, as an Inquisitor, to investigate heretics suspected of being involved in such evil deeds.

In the refugee camp, they had captured those who looked like heretics and interrogated them to determine if they were involved in the graveyard robbery case, and killed them.

Whether that was right or wrong, she had been faithful to her duties.

The missing remains.

Why had the saints' remains been stolen, and where had they gone?

Louise frowned, deep in thought.

"It seems that interrogating and killing the heretics was the only conclusion the priest could reach…"

"That being said, finding the suspected culprits and getting killed by them is a relatively likely scenario…"

"But are there really heretic forces in the refugee camp capable of such acts?"

It was impossible to say that such a thing could not happen.

However, if Rowan had indeed provoked a powerful heretic group in the refugee camp and suffered a massacre along with the other Inquisitors, there was one puzzle piece that didn't fit.

Everyone's gaze naturally turned towards Ludwig.

"Then why…"

Ludwig was also confused, unable to understand why Rowan had approached him.

"One thing is certain, she didn't need a bodyguard. She definitely approached you deliberately."

Rowan was more skilled than Ludwig; it was clear that she didn't need a bodyguard. She had only disguised her intentions as such; in reality, she had deliberately sought out Ludwig in his guard unit.

However, Ellen was starting to think that these two cases might not be separate

incidents.

Rowan had been investigating the whereabouts of the missing remains.

And in order to destroy the Hero Religion, she had approached Ludwig to reach Ellen.

It was clear that the person despised heretics, so she might have pursued two completely separate matters.

Knowing that Rowan was somewhat aware of the truth behind the Gate incident, Ellen came to a different conclusion than the rest of the people in the room.

Ludwig's involvement was separate from the heretic and stolen remains cases.

The stolen remains case was an urgent matter that had come before Rowan's eyes. Thus, she had no choice but to investigate it.

Approaching Ellen through Ludwig would be an entirely different matter from Rowan's perspective, undertaken with a long-term view.

Circumstantially, Ellen was certain that Rowan had no choice but to hate her.

But ultimately, the problem returns to its starting point.

Who killed Rowan?

"Could there be a heretic force of that size in the refugee camp… capable of possessing the power to attack the Inquisitors' church?"

At Ellen's question, Louise fell silent, as if nothing came to mind.

Continuing to ponder but having nothing to say, Heinrich von Schwarz broke the silence.

"What about the Demon God Cult…?"

"The Demon God Cult?"

Not heretics, but real sects.

"Yeah, it's impossible for there to be no Demon God Cult in the refugee camp where heretics are rampant."

In reality, unlike the Hero Religion followers with their half-hearted faith, the Demon God Cult wielded the genuine power of demon gods.

The truly dangerous sect had always been the Demon God Cult.

"Yeah… I hadn't been considering that angle."

Louise slowly nodded her head.

Although the Demon God Cult in the refugee camp was not responsible for the stolen remains case, Heinrich's speculation was true in a broader context.

CHAPTER 593

Under the order for full cooperation from the commander of the Holy Knights, Ellen gained the authority to access the case.

And although she was not officially assisting in the investigation, Louise von Schwarz was also lending her intellect to the case as Ellen's aide.

Heinrich then expressed his opinion that the heretical followers of the Demon God Cult might be involved in the case.

Unlike the Hero Religion members, the Demon God Cult followers used the divine power of the Demon God and many of them possessed dangerous powers. Thus, if there truly were Demon God Cult forces at play, they could have stolen from the Holy Knights' Cathedral tomb and even killed Rowan, who was hot on their trail.

Ludwig spoke with a serious expression.

"From what I've heard from Rowan… Since the Hero Religion members are not considered heretics… There are cases of real heretics disguising themselves as members of the Hero Religion."

"…That's entirely possible."

Louise nodded in agreement with Ludwig's words.

The Hero Religion was not an organized force with roots. Hence, it was not uncommon for their faith to be mixed with other beliefs.

It was possible that the Demon God Cult followers were spreading their disguised Demon God faith in the refugee village.

And unlike the Hero Religion, the Demon God Cult followers formed an organized force.

"If that were possible, the Demon God Cult followers disguised as the Hero Religion might nearly dominate the refugee village."

Instead of being a hidden force, there was a possibility that they were already the dominant religious force throughout the refugee village, wearing the guise of the Hero Religion.

"In that case… Rowan might have been fighting an unimaginably huge monster."

If it were true that the refugee village was infiltrated by the Demon God Cult disguised as the Hero Religion, Rowan might have been wandering the village to expose the true nature of the colossal Demon God Cult followers.

It wasn't about capturing innocent refugees but actually capturing and interrogating real Demon God Cult followers. If so, Rowan could have been a person trying to enforce their own sense of justice.

Were the people Rowan captured, tortured, and killed Demon God Cult followers or innocent individuals?

It was becoming increasingly difficult to determine whether Rowan's actions were good or evil.

In the end, countless possibilities were presented as no one could determine Rowan's true intent or the identity of Rowan's killer.

Ellen tapped her finger on the table, surrounded by countless conjectures.

"For now, I think we should go to the Saints' Tomb."

The crime scene.

Ellen concluded that they should go there first.

The theft of the remains from the Saints' Tomb could not be considered the starting point of all the incidents.

Rowan had been an Inquisitor of the heretics in the Imperial Capital for a long time.

She must have had her own goals in mind.

It was unclear whether that goal was to expose and exterminate the Demon God Cult followers or to completely eradicate the Hero Religion.

After the Gate Incident, radical events had always occurred.

A bomb explosion didn't mean the bomb was the cause of everything.

In a world where gunpowder was scattered everywhere, massive explosions could occur anywhere.

The problem was the gunpowder.

There were too many problems in the world: the Demon God Cult followers ran rampant, the Hero Religion surpassed the position of the Five Great Religions, and issues of famine and epidemics arose.

Accidents continued to happen everywhere due to the Gate Incident, which was the root cause of all these issues.

The stolen remains from the Tomb of the Saints case was simply the result of various problems scattered everywhere converging and causing an explosion.

That was what Ellen was thinking.

The Holy Knights themselves were also investigating the case internally.

"It seems that Rowan did not share the details of the investigation with the Holy Knights. Or, the commander was lying."

Rowan would have immediately embarked on the investigation after the incident occurred.

The commander of the Holy Knights returned with the senior knights, but he denied knowing anything about the details of Rowan's investigation.

Since Ellen couldn't be sure if the commander was cooperating fully, she had no way to get to the truth of the case other than seeing and hearing it for herself.

The commander could lie to Ellen or hide information, but he couldn't block her path.

Ellen expressed her intention to see the scene, and soon Eleion Bolton assigned a senior knight to guide her.

"It's an honor to meet you, Hero. I will be your guide from now on."

"Thank you."

Ellen didn't trust the guide much, as he was likely no different from the commander.

Ellen and her party headed to the Holy Knights Cathedral underground.

There were many facilities in the underground of the Cathedral, but the Tomb of the Saints was located in the deepest part.

The Holy Knights blocking the path stepped aside as soon as they saw Ellen.

Louise had also decided to help Ellen and Ludwig, but she kept quiet.

It was Ellen's responsibility to take the lead.

"Can you briefly explain the outline of the case?"

"The incident occurred on the 3rd of the 12th month, about 17 days ago."

An incident that happened 17 days ago.

The commander couldn't return immediately after the incident, so he could only return to the empire after a considerable amount of time had passed.

So, it was understandable that he didn't know the details of the investigation or its progress.

The details were clear and simple.

On the morning of the 3rd day of the 12th month, a priest in charge of managing the Tomb of the Saints entered and found the tomb destroyed, immediately reporting it to the on-duty priest.

When the on-duty priest and Holy Knights arrived to check the scene, they discovered not only that a significant number of stone coffins had been destroyed

but also that the remains had disappeared.

"How was the security?"

"The Tomb of the Saints originally… does not have its own guards. However, in order to go down to the tomb, one would inevitably have to be seen by knights or priests. But…"

"Nobody saw the perpetrator?"

"That's correct."

"What about the locking mechanism?"

"The entrance leading to the Tomb of the Saints is usually locked. Keys are only given to the priests responsible for managing the tomb. However, after interrogating the management priests, it was revealed that they kept the keys in their private rooms."

"…So there was a possibility of theft?"

"Someone could have used it secretly."

Thieves who stole something that shouldn't be stolen from a tomb where there was nothing to steal.

The priests in charge of the tomb's management would inevitably face severe punishment.

And they would also be suspected of possibly being the culprits.

"According to the priest who discovered the scene, the tomb was locked as usual."

"Did the thief lock the door and then run away?"

"…We cannot be sure about that."

What a ludicrous notion.

No one had witnessed the culprits as they descended into the underground tomb, and the door had been locked.

While negligence in key management or the involvement of insiders could not be entirely ruled out, the most likely possibility was one thing.

They may have entered the underground tomb through spatial teleportation.

"There's a possibility that a high-ranking mage was involved."

It was highly likely that a mage capable of using teleportation or even mass teleportation was involved in this incident.

"The Holy Knights are keeping that possibility in mind. You'll see for yourself when you get to the scene."

As they reached the Saints' tomb, the leading Holy Knight inserted a large key into the massive entrance and unlocked the door.

-Creaking

The Holy Knight opened the door, which a regular person could not even properly open, all by himself. It was an enormous door that seemed difficult for ordinary people to push or pull.

Soon, the door opened, and Ellen could see the scene that had been preserved exactly as it was at the time of the incident.

A massive underground chamber.

Not only were the stone coffins embedded in the walls, but the ones buried in the ground were also hollowed out.

There were intact stone coffins, but a considerable number of them were broken.

And the fragments scattered on the floor.

"It's not just theft, it's destruction."

"Yes… that's correct."

"How could such a commotion go unnoticed above?"

"It should have been heard. But none of the priests who were upstairs heard anything."

Noise suppression.

And spatial teleportation.

Louise stared at the scene and murmured,

"Noise-cancelling, indeed."

It was inevitable that they would be certain that a mage was involved in the incident.

"May I go in and take a closer look?"

"Yes, by all means."

Ellen slowly entered the underground tomb.

The Holy Knights didn't provide Ellen with much information, but they didn't stop her either.

Only those present could discover and judge anything beyond superficial information.

The tomb of the Saints.

Ellen had no knowledge of nor need to know about such a place.

Ludwig, Heinrich, and Louise followed Ellen into the underground tomb.

It wasn't yet certain whether the attackers of the church and the bone thieves were the same.

However, it was clear that there was a superhuman among those who attacked the church, and a mage was definitely involved in stealing the bones.

Everyone had an intuition that no matter what kind of group the culprits belonged

to, they couldn't possibly be ordinary people.

There were stone coffins buried in the ground, and others embedded in the walls as if stored away.

Like a cabinet, for example.

Whether the thief was alone or in a group, most of the stone coffins were broken.

No matter how much they used noise-cancelling to suppress the sound, the destruction was excessive. It was nothing short of devastation.

'There were many ways to do this more discreetly, like stealing only the bones and leaving the coffins untouched.'

If they had done that, the Holy Knights wouldn't have known about the stolen bones for quite some time.

What became clear was that the thieves acted as if they didn't care whether they were caught or not.

'They were confident they wouldn't get caught, even with such actions.'

Whether it was a mockery of the Holy Knights, confidence in not getting caught, or both, it was impossible to know.

Everyone looked around the scene in their own way, but there was still something unknown.

Why did they take them?

Why did they steal the bones in the first place? If they had left them damaged, it could have displayed their anger towards the Holy Knights or the Five Great Religions.

"Anger…?"

Anger towards the Five Great Religions.

And that anger was especially directed at two of the religions.

Tu’an and Als.

Although a considerable number of stone coffins had been destroyed, there were still intact ones.

Some corpses had been taken, while others had not.

'Could they have only taken the remains of the saints who believed in Tu’an and Als in their lifetime?'

Ellen reads the part corresponding to the brief history on a fragment of a destroyed stone coffin.

'No.'

Just in case, she skimmed the names, but there were not only the remains of holy knights who had believed in Tu’an and Als in their lifetime, but also those of Riter, Mencis, and Shal’am's holy knights.

'There's no clear distinction.'

It might not be an expression of anger or a force that hates all of the Five Great Religions.

As Ellen skimmed the names, she couldn't help but find a familiar one.

"This is…”

Ellen couldn't help but widen her eyes.

Riverrier Lanze, who had been killed by Reinhardt.

As soon as she found the name, Ellen couldn't help but bite her lip.

During the Miss Temple Contest, Reinhardt had not revealed himself.

Back then, Reinhardt had fought Riverrier Lanze to save Olivia Lanze.

Suddenly recalling the memory, Ellen's head was wrapped in a severe headache.

"Ugh…!"

"Ellen!"

As Ellen suddenly grabbed her head and collapsed, Heinrich and Ludwig, who had been looking around, as well as the holy knights who had been watching Ellen, rushed over.

"Ugh…!"

It felt like thousands of needles were stabbing her head.

"What's going on, are you alright?"

"Hero, are you okay?!"

"Wh-why all of a sudden…?"

"Are you okay? Snap out of it!"

Surrounded by the echoing voices, Ellen tried to catch her breath with her eyes wide open, feeling overwhelmed by the pressure.

Suddenly encountering the name and memory, it felt like her brain was being dug out with an awl.

An unknown source of hatred and anger tried to engulf her body.

Inside her own soul, the presence of 'that' which tries to devour her at some point pressured Ellen's mind.

The waves in her soul that had been dormant because her attention was elsewhere surged.

Today, she encountered too many things she had been trying to forget, including the Demon King and the Gate incident.

That's why the once-dormant turbulence in her soul tried to engulf Ellen.

"I-I'm… I'm alright… just a little dizzy…”

It was not something that could be explained as dizziness, but Ellen had to hold her head and catch her breath while sitting down.

Not yet.

Not yet.

She could still endure it.

Not yet.

She could still be at peace.

She couldn't let go of her body, mind, and spirit yet.

She has to think about something else.

Just thinking about the Demon King and her feelings for Reinhardt made her feel like her soul was being tormented.

Ellen clutched the bone fragment pendant around her neck.

With the emotional milestone that Dettomorian had carved for her attached.

She must remember.

She must forget.

She must forget, so she won't be robbed.

She focused on the case.

Riverrier Lanze had only been robbed of his remains.

She must see the end of this strange murder and massacre case.

She must find out where all of this leads.

In the midst of such thoughts.

Ellen thought of something else.

The murder case, the Demon King, the Gate incident, and the stolen remains.

A single word to forget everything that confuses her mind.

Returning to the Temple.

Feeding the cat.

Like a lie.

“Haa…… Haa……”

The pain that seemed to tear at her head and soul finally stopped.

“…”

And, for such a reason, the cessation of pain left Ellen dumbfounded for a while.

“Is there some kind of corrupt energy lingering in this place? It might have affected you…”

“No. It’s not that. This just happens sometimes.”

In response to everyone's concern, Ellen said it wasn't like that.

The investigation was important, but Ellen's life was the most important. Even the holy knights were pale with shock.

Ellen should prioritize herself, and others shared the same thought.

“We don’t need to rush. Let's return and rest for now.”

Therefore, Louise suggested that they stop here and return to the temple to gather their thoughts.

Ellen glanced around the underground tomb.

The stone coffins had been destroyed, and some clues about the thieves were obtained by sight.

The reason for the theft was still unknown.

And Ellen was suddenly frightened.

The fear that the vengeful spirits, which had been quiet lately, might completely engulf her.

“That’s true. It seems like there’s nothing more to find out here……”

Therefore, Ellen agreed with Louise. They couldn't predict where these clues would lead, but they had already completed their examination.

“But, uh……”

However, Ludwig seemed hesitant to leave, as if he had some doubts.

“Did you find anything peculiar?”

At Louise's question, Ludwig shook his head with an ambiguous expression.

“Huh? No… I was just curious about something…”

“What is it?”

Since he said he had doubts, they all followed Ludwig.

Ludwig headed towards the wall of the underground tomb.

The place with the broken stone coffins.

“How did they break this coffin…?”

“…Huh?”

“How?”

“…?”

Ludwig's question left the other three unable to hide their confusion.

Like Ellen, and like the holy knights.

Everyone had focused on the destruction itself. They wondered why the thieves had chosen to cause such a mess in the underground tomb when they could have stolen the items without being detected.

They focused on ‘why’ it was broken, not ‘how’ it was broken, and there was no reason to consider that.

So what's the big deal?

“Why are you suddenly asking that?”

At Heinrich's question, Ludwig looked at the broken stone coffin.

The inside of the broken stone coffin looked like a hollow hole.

Ludwig gazed at the empty wall and said,

“They didn’t clean up the scene, right?”

“Yeah, they said that.”

Ludwig peered inside the hollow hole, showing his left fist.

“If they broke it like this with a fist or something… shouldn't there be stone fragments inside?”

At Ludwig's question, Ellen finally looked inside the stone coffin.

For superhumans, breaking a rock is no big deal.

They chose to use a violent method deliberately, and there were no concerns about noise due to noise canceling.

They smashed the stone coffin with their fists. The force was applied from the outside to the inside.

In that case, there should have been stone dust or fragments inside the coffin.

There was a lack of stone dust or fragments inside the stone coffin. It wasn't entirely absent, but it was definitely peculiar.

The traces were too few.

The same went for the other stone coffins.

However, there were too many fragments of the stone coffins on the ground, and they were scattered far away.

Ludwig examined the other stone coffins.

“What is this… Should I say it looks like they were broken from the inside out? Doesn't it?”

“!”

“That's…!”

Louise and Ellen couldn't help but notice something.

The scattered fragments at the scene certainly told them.

That the direction of the force applied was from the inside to the outside.

“How could they break it like that…?”

“The corpses.”

“Huh?”

Ellen answered Ludwig's question.

“They resurrected them.”

Ellen spoke with widened eyes.

“They resurrected the saints' corpses… as undead…”

The corpses themselves came back to life and broke out of the stone coffins.

There was no reason to think about why they had broken them like this.

If they had thought about how it was broken, they could have immediately realized what had happened here.

These were not just any corpses, but the corpses of the saints, who were honored by the Holy Knights.

Someone resurrected those corpses as undead and disappeared.

The bones were not stolen but resurrected.

Ellen, Ludwig, who provided the hint, and both Louise and Heinrich couldn't help but stand still in the face of that shocking conclusion.

CHAPTER 594

The remains in the Tomb of the Saints were not stolen, but rather, it became highly likely that someone had resurrected them as undead and then disappeared.

Thanks to Ludwig's intuition, Ellen, who discovered this crucial fact, asked the Holy Knight in charge of guiding them.

"Did the Holy Knights Order know about this?"

"…"

"You did know."

Silence serves as an answer.

However, it wasn't possible to question them about why they had lied by keeping this secret.

The fact that these individuals, who had been elevated to sainthood, had become undead would undoubtedly be seen as an insult and a fatal blemish on the reputation of the Five Great Religions.

No one would have wanted this truth to be known, even if it was the hero herself.

"It's not certain. It's just a conjecture at this point."

"I suppose so."

Eleion Bolton would not have wanted Ellen to know about this. But inadvertently, Ellen had intended to stop there, but Ludwig unexpectedly got to the truth.

The Holy Knights Order knew.

But they had to keep it a secret since it couldn't be publicly disclosed.

Eleion Bolton could not stop Ellen, but the reason for hiding the truth must have

been that.

"Are you hiding anything else?"

"No."

But Ellen couldn't believe that either.

"Let's go."

There's nothing more to learn from this place.

After leaving the Holy Knight's Cathedral, the four of them continued walking through the snow-swept streets.

"Let's head back to the temple and think this through. The Holy Knights aren't going to help us properly."

"I might be a hindrance. I'm sorry."

It would have been different if it were just Ellen, but Louise von Schwarz was also present.

A very serious problem had arisen within the Holy Knights Order, and not only the hero but also the heir to Kernstadt had learned about this critical truth.

No wonder Eleion Bolton had been uncooperative with Ellen.

"No, you've been helpful enough. No one could have easily touched Ludwig, no matter who they were."

Ludwig's safety was clearly secured politically. Even if Louise couldn't provide direct help, her presence was helpful.

Ellen reviewed the situation.

"The Holy Knight Order knew from the beginning that they weren't just ordinary thieves, but a group involving mages. Rowan must have known the same."

"The Order's leader said that Rowan didn't share the investigation results after he returned and that he didn't know what Rowan was doing. But I can't be sure if that's true."

"It's not entirely impossible that the leader is telling the truth. The administration of the Five Great Religions and the Holy Knight Order was overseen by the five Popes, and if the Pope personally directed it, Rowan wouldn't have had to report to the leader."

"Anyway, Rowan must have investigated the case while knowing about the connection between the undead and the mages. It makes sense that he focused on heretics and cultists."

"While pursuing the case, Rowan must have stepped on the toes of those involved, leading to her assassination. That's at least what we know so far."

"We can't be certain if they are really cultists, though."

"And why on earth did they approach Ludwig?… I don't know. It seems unrelated to this case. They were targeting me, and their intentions are likely unrelated to this case. That's what I think."

There were many truths yet to be discovered.

But ultimately, they couldn't reach the most important core of the matter.

They could somewhat deduce why Rowan was killed.

They weren't sure who killed her, but the list of suspects was narrowing.

However, where were they?

The simpler the case, the harder it was to find the truth; the more complex the case, the easier it was to reach the truth.

But now, they only had complex clues, and they didn't know where those clues pointed.

They couldn't distinguish between meaningful and meaningless clues, so they couldn't draw any conclusions as they had to consider everything.

"Could it be the work of the Demon God Cult…?"

Ludwig cautiously suggested.

"The fact that they revived the bones and killed the priest…"

Ludwig hesitated as he looked at Ellen.

"Could it have been… the Demon King?"

"…"

At that question, Ellen's eyes widened, and so did Louise's and Heinrich's.

Louise had heard from Heinrich today that the Demon King might not be such a wicked being and that there might be an unknown truth behind the Gate incident.

The Demon God Cult and the Demon King had an inseparable relationship.

Either the Demon God Cult acted on the Demon King's orders, or the Demon King himself infiltrated the saints' tomb, revived the bones as undead, and then disappeared.

Ellen felt a splitting headache coming on again.

Reinhardt couldn't have done such a thing; Ellen gritted her teeth and tried to endure the pain.

"The possibility is low."

"Is that so…?"

It wasn't Ellen who shook her head at Ludwig's suspicion, but Louise.

"None of us know where the Demon King is, right?"

"Yes…"

"Even if we knew that the Demon King did this, could we find where he is and punish him?"

At Louise's words, Ludwig dumbly nodded.

"You're right…"

"What reason would the Demon King have to kill the priest? Whether his deeds are exposed or not, no one knows where he is."

"Ah…"

"So there's no reason for the Demon King to risk attacking the church and killing everyone there."

If the Demon King had revived the bones in the underground tomb.

And if Rowan had been killed while investigating the case.

The logical conclusion would be that the Demon King killed Rowan.

But the Demon King would have to have a reason to kill Rowan.

There's no reason for the Demon King to hunt down and kill Rowan, an Inquisitor who pursued him.

The same goes for infamy.

Even if it were known that the Demon King had revived the saints' bones in the Holy Knights' underground tomb, there would be no harm to him.

What would it matter if the story of reviving a few corpses spread when he was already blamed for the Gate incident?

There's no reason or meaning for the Demon King to kill Rowan, so it's unlikely.

The wrong conclusion was reached.

The Demon King has no reason to kill Rowan. So he wouldn't have done it.

Those who killed Rowan were the tomb raiders in the underground tomb of the Holy Knights.

So the wrong conclusion that the Demon King wasn't involved in the tomb raiding incident was formed.

"That's right. The Demon King… there's no benefit for him in killing Rowan. Rather, it's a risk he would take just by infiltrating the Empire and doing such a thing."

Enduring a headache, Ellen barely spoke, sharing the same thoughts as Louise.

It wasn't because they trusted Reinhardt.

In fact, thinking objectively, Reinhardt had no reason to kill Rowan.

The crime scene was ostentatious.

It was as if daring someone to catch the culprit.

If that were the only event, it might have been suspected to be the work of the Demon King.

But with Rowan, who had been tracking the case, being killed, the possibility of it being the Demon King's doing became infinitely low.

The conclusion Louise and Ellen reached was undoubtedly the most rational judgment.

However, the world was often far from rational.

That's why the probability of a rational judgment being wrong was always high.

Ellen said that if it were a simple case, she wouldn't be able to find anything out.

Only if it were complicated, strange, and had something hidden, there might be something she could uncover.

However, the case concealed far-reaching roots, and those roots were not fully exposed.

The priestess performing the purification was the leader of the Inquisitors.

That Inquisitor was investigating the whereabouts of the stolen bones and the culprit while capturing and torturing heretics.

And the bones were not actually stolen, but there was a high possibility that they were revived as undead.

Ultimately, they couldn't resolve everything overnight.

Even though the name of the Demon King was mentioned, Louise and Ellen judged that the possibility of the Demon King being involved in the case was extremely low, and Ludwig, who had raised doubts, had no choice but to agree.

On the way back to the Royal Class dormitory after returning to the temple.

Ludwig's expression remained stern.

Regardless of who was involved and what the truth of the case was, the fact that Ludwig had been deceived by Rowan all this time didn't change.

He didn't know what she was doing or what her intentions were when approaching him, and he hadn't even doubted her.

He was terrified and horrified by the guards killing civilians indiscriminately.

So, when Rowan appeared, he was overjoyed.

Because he thought it was something everyone needed, he did it without any hesitation.

And when Rowan asked if he could continue protecting her in the future.

Ludwig felt as if he had been saved.

But Rowan was an Inquisitor, committing atrocities far worse than those of the guards.

There was no telling how many people had been tortured and killed at her hands.

Ludwig didn't know that.

Even though he could see from Rowan's strange behavior that she was a person who deviated from the norm.

He still believed she was a good person because she was doing something people needed.

To be precise, he wanted to believe that Rowan was a good person, so he believed it.

Ludwig was naive.

Rowan had known Ludwig even before they met, and eventually, she was killed before achieving her goal through Ludwig.

But if Rowan hadn't been killed, she would have achieved her goal through Ludwig.

Whether it was killing Ellen to eliminate the Hero Religion, or something else.

If Rowan had approached Ludwig with the intention of killing Ellen?

Rowan's death might have been a blessing in disguise.

On the way back to the temple.

Ludwig hated his own weakness.

Disillusionment with himself.

Hatred.

Anger.

He thought it was getting better as he met Rowan.

However, Ludwig could not recognize anything about Rowan and, in fact, ended up being deceived.

The comfort and stability obtained through Rowan plunged Ludwig deeper into the abyss.

In reality, nothing happened through Rowan, but both Ellen and Louise had an

intuition that Rowan was suspicious, even though they knew nothing about her. They even felt that Rowan was not an ordinary priestess, despite having been killed.

Ludwig had only thought of Rowan as an unfortunate victim.

He was foolish and naive.

"…"

Now, Ludwig could not help but hate his own foolishness.

Walking ahead, Ellen speaks.

"We have to assume that there may be a mage among the refugees who follow the Demon God Cult. However, there is also the possibility that dark mages are involved instead. That possibility may even be higher."

Depending on who the suspected culprits were, the situation could change drastically.

For now, the Demon King was excluded from the list of suspects.

The forces of the Demon God Cult, who may be hiding in the refugee camp.

Or mages who include dark mages.

If the culprits were the followers of the Demon God Cult, they must investigate the spread of these followers in the refugee camp.

They wouldn't torture and kill civilians, but there were limitations in investigations.

Leaving aside the cruelty of torture, there was no better way to obtain information. Torture could even extract information that doesn't exist.

If dark mages were involved, they must secure evidence of their involvement.

"Will we be able to resolve this before winter passes……?"

Ellen sighed deeply as she looked up at the sky.

If the Demon God Cult followers were rooted in the vast refugee camp and disguised themselves as the Hero Religion?

"Even if the followers of the Demon God Cult are not involved in this matter, if they are rooted in the refugee camp wearing the skin of the Hero Religion, we still need to identify them."

“……That's true."

That was the problem.

Whether or not they were involved, the followers of the Demon God Cult should not exist in the Imperial Capital.

Even if they had nothing to do with Rowan's case, finding them was a necessary task.

Rowan had told Ludwig that she was doing two things at once.

While purifying diseases, she would investigate and address the suspicious events occurring in the refugee camp.

Rowan's purification work was not fake.

While actually purifying diseases, she would interrogate, torture, and kill any heretics she found.

Doing two things at once.

While helping people, she intended to eradicate all the followers of the Demon God Cult.

Rowan had already subtly revealed that she was a heretic inquisitor, but Ludwig hadn't known.

"It's a completely different issue, but there's a problem we need to think about."

This time, Ellen looks at Louise as she speaks.

It was Louise, not Heinrich or Ludwig.

"What is it?"

"The Commander of the Holy Knights kept giving hints. I don't think it's a misunderstanding."

"Hints?"

"He was overly cautious with his words. Of course, it could be because I was present, the case is sensitive, and the commander was with us as well, but……."

Ellen continues.

"If the Pope of the Holy Church has something to hide from him, he said he wouldn't know anything."

"…"

Louise remains silent at Ellen's words.

It wasn't that she had nothing to say, but she was choosing her words carefully.

However, Eleion Bolton had deliberately concealed information from Ellen, but ultimately, he left her free to witness the scene with her own eyes, as there was no stopping her.

"When countries unite, an empire is formed, and an emperor is created. But in the Holy Knights Order, created by the union of the five major holy religions, he claims he is not an emperor," Ellen noted.

Not every emperor in history was stronger than all the kings or feudal lords under their rule.

However, the emperor of the Gardias Empire truly ruled all of humanity's land, wielding more power than any king on the continent.

But the leader of the Holy Knights Order, the commander of the order, was just that - a commander, not a king or anything else.

"Eleion Bolton is not the kind of person who would make such a statement out of a desire for more power than the Popes."

Louise wasn't particularly close to the current Holy Knights Order Commander Eleion Bolton, but she knew enough about him. His support for the empire was not because he was a slave to the empire but because of his desire to maintain the status quo.

He didn't want significant changes in the first place.

So, it's unlikely that he suddenly developed an ambition for power, held a grudge against the five major religions' Popes, and spoke to Ellen for that reason.

"The Popes are deliberately hiding something from the commander, and he doesn't have the authority to find out what it is. He hinted that to me."

Eleion Bolton didn't provide any definite information.

He merely said that if the Popes were hiding something, he wouldn't know.

"But this is an internal issue within the Holy Knights Order. I don't see how it relates to Rowan's case. So I think it will take a lot of consideration before I approach the Popes."

While Ellen could intervene in any human power struggle, she didn't want to meddle excessively in the Holy Knights Order's internal affairs. It was a political matter, and Ellen knew better than to tamper with it recklessly.

In the end, her perspective aligned with Ludwig's.

It's easy to intervene when people are dying, sacrificed, or monsters appear.

But if Ellen suddenly appeared at a conference of the Five Great Religions' Popes and told them to treat the commander as if he were their superior, predicting the outcome of that would be difficult, regardless of its feasibility.

It could be the best course of action, but it could also be the worst.

"If this is merely a power struggle between the commander and the Popes of the Five Great Religions, it's not our concern."

"That's right."

"But if the Popes are involved in this case… I don't know what to do."

It was too dangerous a matter to touch.

It may be unrelated to the case, but if it were, they couldn't afford to ignore it.

"What a headache…"

The Popes of the Five Great Religions might know what even the commander of the Holy Knights Order doesn't.

They were already deeply involved in the internal affairs of the Order, and they didn't know if they would get entangled in even more complex matters from here on.

CHAPTER 595

No one could predict where the four pursuers would end up.

It was clear that an unusual group was involved.

However, if political issues were also tangled up in the matter, it would be even more of a headache.

If they were to investigate incidents related to the undead and end up interfering with the Holy Knights, things could become far more complicated.

"But, you know, there's something I've been wondering…"

While Ellen and Louise were pondering, Heinrich spoke up as if he had a question.

"What is it?"

"Are we really sure that the skeletons have turned into the undead?"

At Heinrich's question, Louise slowly nodded her head.

"We couldn't confirm it ourselves. It seemed the Holy Knights weren't certain about that part either."

The possibility that the skeletons had turned into the undead. That was merely a conjecture based on the destroyed coffin, but strictly speaking, they hadn't confirmed the presence of the undead.

It was merely a strong possibility.

Heinrich's question drew the attention of Ellen, Ludwig, and Louise, who all looked at him.

Feeling the intensity of their gazes, Heinrich began to sweat.

"I was just wondering if creating undead is really that easy…"

"Hmm…?"

At his words, Louise tilted her head.

"Didn't you say that those buried in the cemetery were saints?"

"Yes, they were. They must have been the remains of people who achieved great feats during their lifetimes."

"The tomb of the former Holy Knights Commander was there too."

That was the answer from Louise and Ellen. Hearing it, Heinrich seemed to be choosing his words carefully with a serious expression.

"It's just that I don't quite understand how the skeletons could become undead in the first place…"

They had become undead.

The inference itself was reasonable, but Heinrich had been considering a more fundamental aspect.

These were the remains of priests and Holy Knights who had undoubtedly achieved great feats in their lifetimes and possessed strong divine powers.

Was it even possible for them to be resurrected as undead?

"Well… I don't know much about wicked arts like the undead or dark magic. And for mages who walk the righteous path, it's an unknown area. So, I'm not sure if the divine powers they possessed in life would continue to protect their remains after death."

"I'm not sure either."

The possibility of undead created from the remains of saints, which were not ordinary remains.

Was it even possible to create so many undead in such a short time?

Ellen's thoughts kept returning to Tiamata.

Tiamata had once appeared in the form of a cursed demon sword, creating a massive number of undead.

'No… it can't be. It's not Reinhardt… '

Ellen was convinced that Reinhardt couldn't be the culprit given the circumstances.

Ultimately, Heinrich's question was this:

Was it even plausible to create undead from the remains of the saints in the first place?

"Let's ask."

Surprisingly, the answer came from Ludwig.

"Anna should at least know more than we do."

A mage with talent in dark magic.

Anna de Gerna.

At his words, both Ellen and Heinrich nodded.

There was no guarantee that dark magic had been used in the tomb raiding incident of the saints' tombs. It could just as well be the work of priests of the Demon God Cult, involving a power different from magic.

The two were separate powers.

However, there might be some common ground in their ability to produce similar results.

The priest of the Demon God Cult was nowhere to be found, so Ludwig suggested they try asking Anna first. It seemed like a reasonable idea.

"She won't be at the dormitory. She comes back every few days, then leaves again the next day and doesn't return for several days."

"Where would she be? Let's go ask her."

Ellen thought it would be as simple as finding Anna at the temple and asking her.

"Huh? I'm not quite sure…"

Ludwig, of course, had no idea where the three of them were conducting their magic research.

Naturally, Louise and Heinrich's gazes met.

"The Magic University."

That morning, while the two had been strolling around the temple, they had discovered that some research was being conducted at the Magic University.

"I'm not certain, but I think she might be there."

It was Heinrich who spoke, and Louise furrowed her brow.

"I wonder if they'll let us in…"

Louise seemed unsure, having seen how strict the security was.

However, they were now accompanied by Ellen Artorius, who could gain entry to practically anywhere.

So there should have been no issue getting in.

Of course, that was a misconception.

"You are not permitted to enter."

No sooner had they stepped foot on the grounds of the Temple Magic University's research building, than a guard blocked Ellen's path.

It wasn't that the people behind her were attempting to enter. The guard had directly addressed Ellen when she tried to enter.

“…Why?"

"His Majesty the Emperor has ordered that no one other than those involved in the research may enter."

Ellen was included in that order, since the guard was blocking her way.

Ellen stared at the eyes of the guard inside the helmet.

What kind of top-secret research were they conducting that even she couldn't gain entry?

Ellen would have forced her way in if it had been the door of the Holy Knights.

However, the fact that it was an 'Emperor's order' mattered.

Emperor Bertus was a friend to Ellen.

They shared secrets that others must not know, and both bore the responsibility of the Gate incident.

They shared an indescribable relationship, bound together by guilt and lingering sadness.

If her friend had forbidden even her own entry, there must have been a reason.

Ellen accepted that.

"I don't need to go in. I just need to know if my classmate, Anna de Gerna, is participating in the research in that lab. And if possible, could you call her for me?"

"I cannot reveal any information related to the research."

Even the participants' identities were classified. Ellen couldn't fathom why the security was so ironclad.

"However, I can report to my superiors that the Hero has come on such an errand."

Ellen wasn't particularly curious about the nature of the research.

She simply assumed that it was something helpful to the war effort, and that its secrecy was necessary to prevent potential abuse.

That was good enough. Ellen didn't feel slighted or compelled to force her way in.

Whatever research was being conducted here had nothing to do with their current situation.

"Then that will do. Can you pass that message along?"

"Yes, I understand."

Ellen didn't know whether Anna would be here, but if she wasn't, they would just have to wait for her to return to the Royal Class dormitory.

After a few days, Anna would return once again.

With no immediate means to report their findings, the group had no choice but to return to the temple dormitory at the behest of the guard.

For reasons unknown, the emperor had issued orders preventing not only others, but also Ellen, from entering the Magic University.

Royal Class, second-year, B-class dormitory lobby.

Everyone gathered and took a break while sipping the tea Heinrich had brought.

Although they hadn't suffered physically from wandering around in the snow until now, it was inevitable that they would experience mental fatigue.

"It seems to be a highly confidential experiment, although we don't know what it is."

"That's true."

At Louise's words, Ellen quietly nodded.

Everyone present was curious about the research being conducted at the Magic University, but they didn't harbor any further suspicions.

That was due to their preconceptions.

"Come to think of it, it was strange that the Titan project had been conducted without maintaining confidentiality. That's why the archduke has been greatly inconvenienced by the mages from the Mage Guild and the Mage Corps."

"Inconvenienced?"

At Ellen's question, Louise shrugged.

"Mages are individuals who can't help but be curious about new magic or technology. And for those who have devoted their lives to magic, the Titan must be… shocking to behold, right?"

"Indeed…"

"Yes… That's right. Definitely."

Heinrich and Ludwig also shuddered at the thought of the Titan's overwhelming power, even though it wasn't in front of them.

The Titan's appearance in the Serandia battle had been gigantic and overwhelming, visible from anywhere on the battlefield.

"Although the higher-ups and mages generally knew that such a thing was being made, seeing it with their own eyes was a different matter. Even I felt that it was unfair that such a thing was possible with magic."

Although the Titan was a war weapon created with magic, everyone couldn't help but feel as if they were witnessing a divine manifestation or apparition in front of it.

"So it's only natural that the archduke, who was the main pillar of that project, is being tormented by the mages. And… it's not just the archduke."

Class A's Adelia.

The archduke is the archduke, but Adelia is a student from the Royal Class.

Heinrich muttered absentmindedly.

"Adelia must be going through a great ordeal as well."

"Of course."

Although the Titan project was not strictly confidential, not all of its technology had been disclosed. So it was inevitable that mages, whether out of curiosity or greed for that knowledge, would pester the archduke and Adelia.

Mages swarmed like a pack of dogs, asking them various questions, and Adelia, being who she was, couldn't turn them away coldly.

Heinrich couldn't help but worry about Adelia's mental state when he imagined the scene.

Adelia is a researcher of the highest order. She is not suited for direct combat, nor is she good at it.

Of course, Adelia didn't fight directly, but by completing the Titan, she would be remembered as the mage who killed the most monsters in the world.

Magic research is generally confidential.

This time was no different, and because of this preconception, no one harbored any significant doubts. Of course, everyone found it strange that even Ellen couldn't enter the research facility.

"I wonder when Anna will return?"

In response to Ludwig's question, none of them could be certain.

In the end, the guards wouldn't tell them whether Anna was at the Magic University or not. They only agreed to relay the message that Ellen had come looking for her.

Asking Anna about the dark magic related to the undead wouldn't provide a clever solution to their current situation. They simply wanted to know if it was easy to create undead from the remains of the saints.

Ultimately, they were all feeling anxious, but there was no immediate solution or new idea to be found.

They could request an audience with the high priests of the Five Great Religions, but that was a sensitive issue that required further consideration.

If they were to join the search for the heretics in the refugee camp, there would be no guarantees.

Rowan didn't work alone; she had dispersed numerous inquisitors throughout the camp to gather and consolidate information.

They couldn't tell if Rowan had discovered the true identity of the culprits.

It was a case Rowan had been pursuing, and they had even fewer resources available to them.

They couldn't know whether they would reach the end of this matter before winter's end.

So there was no point in rushing today.

"Let's call it a day."

Ellen suggested that they organize the information they had gathered today and rest.

"Ludwig, when Anna returns, ask her the questions we wanted to ask, and let us know… No, just call me."

Ellen corrected herself, realizing it would be better for her to ask Anna directly.

"Alright, I got it."

Ludwig nodded with a determined expression.

"I don't think we need to rush too much. Even if we don't know who killed Rowan, if they find out we're chasing them…"

Louise looked at everyone with a serious expression and continued.

"We must always keep in mind that they might try to harm us."

They were dealing with the people who had killed Rowan.

They couldn't be sure if the culprits would go after the heroes as well, but they couldn't rule out the possibility that the same fate awaited them once they knew they were being pursued.

Heinrich, Ludwig, and Ellen.

They all understood that pursuing this matter came with considerable risk.

"I feel like I dragged you into this mess…"

Ludwig hadn't thought it was a simple matter.

But when he had asked for Ellen's help, he couldn't have known it would turn into such a huge incident.

The thought that Ellen might be in danger because of him sent shivers down Ludwig's spine.

Moreover, it felt like causing an irreversible inconvenience.

"No."

Ellen shook her head at Ludwig's self-blame.

"At this point, we can't just let it go."

She added that it would be better for everyone if they could take action before the situation escalated, regardless of what might happen.

It wasn't a statement meant to console.

She genuinely believed it and said it for that reason alone.

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There was no need to act hastily.

Their opponents were a mysterious force capable of attacking a church where the leader of the Heretic Inquisitors resided and carrying out a massacre.

At this point, it was impossible to be certain if they were a group of mages, followers of the Demon God Cult, or an entirely separate third power.

The important thing was that they were the kind of people who wouldn't leave a pursuer alone, and there was a high possibility that they would target not only the hero but also the princess of the Schwarz royal family.

In that regard, even if they didn't know about the church where the Heretic Inquisitors were hiding under the guise of a ruined church of Tu'an, the Temple itself would undoubtedly be safe.

Stirring them up with hasty actions was not a good idea.

So, for now, Ellen planned to wait at the Royal Class dormitory, hoping to hear some clues from Anna de Gerna.

They also needed to carefully consider how to deal with the internal problems within the Holy Knight Order.

For now, they would wait and observe the situation.

Ludwig stayed in the B-Class dormitory.

Ellen, Louise, and Heinrich were in the A-Class dormitory.

Snow was falling, and they needed to sort out their thoughts.

Heinrich wasn't a superhuman; he was tired from wandering around all day and had gone to rest in his room.

Louise sat on the lobby sofa, lost in thought, and saw Ellen, who had just taken a shower, walking down the hallway with a towel around her neck.

"Is something wrong?"

"Ah…"

Ellen tilted her head as she looked at Louise.

"Have you seen my cat?"

"Um… Did it go missing?"

Louise had never been interested in pets, but if it was Ellen's beloved cat, the situation could be serious.

As Louise hesitated, unsure of what to say, Ellen shook her head.

"No, it usually wanders around by itself. It was the same at the garrison. It'll be back soon."

If the cat wasn't in sight, Ellen calmly assumed that it was wandering around another dormitory. She sat down opposite Louise and started to dry her hair with the towel, rubbing the ends gently.

The hero, Ellen Artorius.

Her brother, Ragan Artorius's fame had already faded.

Ellen Artorius's status as the next hero had grown even more prominent.

At times, she seemed a bit clumsy and didn't talk much.

But she was still a girl of her age.

"Do you like cats?"

"…"

At Louise's question, Ellen furrowed her brow, considering for a moment.

"I don't think I used to."

"Really?"

"Yes."

Ellen checked that there were no cats nearby and gazed quietly out of the window at the falling snow.

"Even now, I don't think I 'raise' it… It just comes to visit me occasionally."

She added that she saw the cat more as a friend who stopped by now and then, rather than her own pet.

In fact, Ellen seemed unconcerned about the cat not being in sight, assuming it was simply wandering around somewhere.

"I hope it didn't go outside."

It was cold, and it was snowing.

So, she hoped the cat was wandering around inside the Royal Class dormitory, not outside.

Ellen said that and continued drying her hair.

A hero who kept a cat.

Louise couldn't help but smile as she thought about Ellen's sudden offer to pet the cat the day before.

It seemed as though she had no thoughts, yet her appearance today was somehow different.

When Ludwig, who had been through a lot, asked for help, she immediately agreed to lend a hand without asking any questions.

Despite knowing the danger, she took the lead in unraveling the incident, quickly figuring out where she needed to go with her sharp mind and judgment.

Wise, quick to judge, unhesitating in helping others, she was already strong in her own right.

She may not look like a hero, but rather, it was the ordinary appearance concealing all aspects that made Ellen a true hero.

To Louise von Schwarz, Ellen Artorius was a stranger.

Her son's classmate, a hero, the owner of two divine relics, and the hope of humanity.

It wasn't the first time she had seen her face in person.

Louise had witnessed Ellen fighting fiercely.

But she had never seen Ellen carrying a cat, conversing with friends, or handling problems.

These human aspects of the hero were unfamiliar to Louise.

In the end, she couldn't help but like them.

Ellen entered the temple, hiding her overly burdensome brother's name.

She was already the owner of a divine relic, but only a handful of people knew her true identity.

After all, a hero is a being that the times require.

Just as Ragan Artorius became a hero because of the Great Demon War.

Ellen Artorius is called a hero because of the current Demon King and the Gate Incident.

Even the Demon King Reinhardt was not treated as a hero until his true identity was discovered.

Everyone thought there were two heroes, but one was a Demon King in disguise, a fact that shocked everyone.

Because of her son's words that the Demon King might not be evil, Louise couldn't

decide what to do.

Louise wasn't ignoring Ellen.

If none of this had happened.

If there had been no Gate Incident, would she have lived a different life?

As a princess and heir to the Schwarz royal family, Louise would have lived as a princess even without the Gate Incident.

But Ellen was different.

Ellen was a commoner.

If there had been no Gate Incident, she would have been destined for an ordinary life.

Because of the Gate Incident, Ellen became the most important person in the world.

If none of this had happened.

Ellen would have lived an ordinary life without bearing any heavy burdens.

"If none of this had happened."

“…Yes?"

"What do you think you'd be doing now?"

"…”

At Louise's sudden question, Ellen fell silent.

"You wouldn't have wanted to live this life, would you?"

“…That's right."

Everyone looked at Ellen only as a hero. But Louise saw the human side of Ellen hidden beneath that title, both yesterday and today.

That's why she was curious about what kind of life Ellen wanted, what dreams she had.

Even though she knew there was no point in talking about such things now.

Ellen stared blankly out the window in response to Louise's question.

If none of this had happened.

"I would have been attending the temple."

Although she was still at the temple now, if there had been no Gate Incident, the temple would have been bustling with countless students.

Even if they weren't very close, as time passed, she would have become friendly enough with everyone to exchange casual conversations.

It would have been the same then as it is now, a sad friendship that could only be called camaraderie.

And.

There would have been no one who died amidst these tangled and distorted relationships.

There wouldn't have been anyone who couldn't come to this place.

If that had been the situation.

If none of this had happened.

Ellen gazes out the window.

Her cursed eyes wouldn't have had to be considered a curse.

If everything hadn't changed and it snowed like this.

No.

A fragment of memory from that day naturally comes to mind.

The mischievous smile of Reinhardt, who shoved a snowball into Harriet's mouth.

The day they sat on the winter terrace on a quiet, snowing night, eating beef stew, comes to mind.

It wasn't a special day.

That's what they thought back then too.

That they would later reminisce about these times.

That these days wouldn't last forever, that every ordinary day they spent together had been special.

So Ellen had vaguely guessed.

That this would be enough.

That they wouldn't ask for more.

Friends.

And the one they loved.

Just being together like that would have been enough.

In the end, it's just that kind of story.

They didn't not know.

The days they thought would never return had become days they couldn't return to.

It wasn't the way they had imagined, but in the end, that's how it turned out.

And they were the ones who had destroyed it all.

If they could go back to that time.

If everything had been as if it never happened, and they had continued living like that.

What would they be doing now?

“…Maybe we'd be making a snowman."

"A snowman…?"

"Yes."

Ellen says this quietly.

In the accumulating snow, just as they had done before.

Eating or drinking something while watching the snowfall.

Or making a snowman.

Simply doing things like that.

Nothing particularly impressive or grand.

They would have been living those ordinary days.

Those special days.

Anna de Gerna did not return the next day either.

Not only Anna, but Christina and Louis Ancton, who were devoted to their research, didn't return either.

The research being conducted at Magic University may not be related to the three of them, so the news might not have reached them.

Since they didn't know where they were researching, everyone had no choice but to wait at the dormitory.

More than anything, it was a time to be cautious.

The day before, they had stirred up people they didn't need to provoke while

running around here and there.

In a situation where they didn't know who their enemy was, acting hastily for even a day was enough.

After waiting at the temple for two days like that.

Anna de Gerna still didn't return.

"Does she usually leave her post for this long?"

At Louise's question, Ludwig nods.

"Yes, she doesn't usually come back soon…"

The four gathered in the Class B dormitory were waiting for Anna to return.

"Even if we meet her, there might not be an ingenious solution… How about searching for the dark mage within the temple?"

"If it were the time when the temple was still in operation, maybe, but I don't think we can find them right now."

In the current situation, the majority of the mages had been dispatched, and it made no difference whether they were dark mages or not. Most of them were undoubtedly at the allied forces' garrison.

"Hmmm…"

Although they had no intention of making hasty moves, they couldn't help but feel restless as they aimlessly spent their time waiting for Anna, whose return was uncertain.

As a result, everyone had gathered in the B-class dormitory and spent the entire day sitting there.

Ellen gently stroked the back of a cat that had fallen asleep on her lap.

Just when they wondered where it had gone, the cat was found nonchalantly sleeping next to Ellen's bed this morning. Ellen had left her door slightly ajar so the

cat could come and go as it pleased, and it roamed around her room as if it owned the place.

"The snow still hasn't stopped, huh."

Heinrich looked outside with a worried expression.

Although the snowfall had weakened, it showed no signs of stopping.

"It seems the Royal Mage Corps have been deployed for snow removal. I heard a large number of mages have returned to the allied forces' garrison as well."

"That's a relief…"

At Ludwig's words, Heinrich quietly nodded his head.

Through the window, they could see the guards inside the temple clearing the snow.

With a considerable number of students dispatched for snow removal support, they all waited for Anna, whose return was uncertain. They only wanted to ask her a simple question, and although they knew that it wouldn't be a significant hint, it was the only option they had for now.

There was also the option of contacting the archbishops of the five major religions, but that was too risky.

Louise and Ellen had decided to gather more clues before taking action.

They had been sitting in the lobby for quite a while when…

-Thud

Louise noticed a door of the dormitory open, and a student walked down the hallway, heading somewhere.

The student appeared sluggish, walking slowly with a gaunt and emaciated frame.

"Ah, Detto."

In response to Ludwig's greeting, the student just gave a slight nod without any

other reply and continued to move along.

"Hello."

Even when Ellen greeted him, the student only gave a slight nod without showing any interest and went on his way.

During the two days of waiting in the dormitory, Louise had encountered the gaunt student several times. Louise quietly watched his retreating figure.

"Detto… Morian, was it?"

"Yes."

"Well… um… he seems like an odd kid."

Louise chose her words carefully so as not to be rude.

Although she hadn't observed him for long, Dettomorian had a strong, distinct impression. Anyone would inevitably feel a creepy and ominous vibe from him.

"He may be misunderstood a lot, but he's a good friend."

At Ludwig's words, Ellen nodded in agreement.

Louise couldn't help but feel noticeably flustered by that statement.

"No, I didn't mean he seemed like a bad kid…"

"Sister, we understand what you mean. I, too… haven't really talked much with him."

Heinrich was still avoiding Dettomorian because of his eerie atmosphere.

Dettomorian would carry on with his tasks, showing no interest in Louise, a stranger in the dormitory, or anyone else. He didn't care who greeted him or who was around.

Louise had some knowledge about Heinrich's classmates.

Of course, seeing them with her own eyes was different.

"His talent is in shamanism, right?"

"Yes."

Dettomorian, a talent for shamanism.

"What exactly is this shamanism?"

At Louise's question, both Heinrich and Ludwig wore ambiguous expressions.

"Well… I'm not quite sure myself."

Even Ludwig, who had lived together with her for a long time, had no idea what shamanism was.

Something like magic, but not magic.

"I can't be sure how it manifests, but it is certainly a means of harnessing power. I have witnessed it several times myself."

"You've seen it firsthand?"

"Yes."

It was Ellen who answered instead.

A long time ago, Ellen had witnessed the Dettomorian ritual to awaken the cursed demon sword Tiamata alongside Reinhardt.

She also saw the Dettomorian praying for peace with Bertus and Saviolin Turner.

The amulet currently hanging around Ellen's neck was also carved by a Dettomorian.

Ellen didn't know whether the amulet around her neck was really protecting her.

Dettomorian had told her to wish for the amulet to be a guide that would protect her soul.

So, she did just that.

She couldn't know if it truly harnessed power or not, but she wished for it to be so.

Was this the essence of shamanism?

Louise didn't doubt Ellen's claim that she had seen the shamanism manifest several times. Ellen must have seen it, so she must be speaking the truth.

"Fascinating."

Louise crossed her arms.

"If shamanism manifests power, is it a method of handling mana, or is it a form of divine power?"

A more fundamental question.

Was the shamanism magic, or was it faith?

All three of them could only wear puzzled expressions at this question.

"I'm not certain, but I've heard that shamanism is the most primitive form of magic."

Heinrich's knowledge was limited to that, and even then, it was a story that most ordinary people didn't know. He only knew this much because there was a Dettomorian with the peculiar talent of shamanism among his classmates.

Before established magic existed in the world, the practitioners of shamanism were the first mages.

Thus, shamanism was a primitive form of magic.

Ellen knew this as well.

However, she had never given much thought to shamanism.

It seemed quite peculiar when she thought about it.

When Dettomorian performed the ritual for Tiamata and when he prayed for peace.

From the beginning, the word "prayer."

"But when actually using it, it's more like… praying."

Louise looked at Ellen with interest.

"Magic that manifests through prayer? Is that even possible?"

Magic was a 'technique' that refines mana within or outside the body using established formulas and theories. That was the way of mages.

However, prayer was simply wishing for the power itself to manifest. That was the way of priests.

"That's true."

Upon hearing Louise's words, Ellen sensed that something was strange.

"The shamanism, it seems like a very odd power."

It was impossible to determine if shamanism was truly magic or not.

There were no established formulas or theories. Thus, it was not a technique.

Yet, it wasn't praying to the Five Great Gods either, so it wasn't a power derived from the divine abilities of the gods.

Where did the power of shamanism come from?

If it didn't come from somewhere else, it should be within the realm of technique like that of the mages. However, shamanism didn't seem to have any techniques at all.

Shamanism was indeed a very strange power.

"Isn't it strange, though…?"

As Ellen and Louise were lost in confusion, Ludwig slipped into the conversation.

"Isn't it strange that a power that's neither magic nor divine actually works?"

At Ludwig's question, Louise tilted her head.

"Well, you know how heretics perform rituals that cause strange things to happen. I'm not talking about the believers in the Demon God Cult but rather… people who don't really believe in anything, yet their bizarre rituals manifest power… Couldn't such a thing be possible?"

Ludwig was merely recalling Rowan's words.

Heretics prayed to strange places, and while their prayers might not always be effective, sometimes they are.

They probably didn't use magic, but something did happen.

"Is shamanism not so different from the rituals of heretics…?"

"No, that's not what I meant."

Realizing what he had just said, Ludwig became flustered.

Ludwig wanted to say that it wasn't so strange for shamanism to wield power.

But by saying that Dettomorian was no different from a heretic, Ludwig almost wanted to bite his own tongue.

"No."

Ellen shook her head, looking at the bewildered Ludwig.

"Come to think of it, instead of Anna, we should have been looking for the Dettomorian."

The heretics in the refugee camp, or perhaps the followers of the Demon God Cult.

If they were involved in this case, they should be looking for the Dettomorian rather than Anna.

Praying to an unknown power and receiving a response.

If the cause of the incident was the heretics' rituals, they might need to look for a shaman instead of a dark mage.

Dettomorian had just left the dormitory.

"Let's go find him."

"Do you know where he went? Dettomorian seems to be out often."

At Ludwig's question, Ellen nodded.

That eerie and grotesque space.

The basement of the club building.

Ellen knew that the Dettomorian was there every day, offering his prayers.

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The clubhouse had become the complete lair of Dettomorian after the operations of the temple had been suspended.

As they entered the underground space, everyone except Ellen couldn't help but be shocked.

"What is this…?"

Ludwig.

"Damn, is that blood?"

Heinrich.

"What, what is all this supposed to mean?"

Louise.

The three of them couldn't help but feel fear as they entered the space filled with unidentified spell circles and symbols.

Regardless of personal strength and experience, anyone who faced this scene for the first time was bound to feel an inexplicable fear. In fact, even Ellen had been overwhelmed when she first came here.

"Is it alright for us to be here…?"

Indeed, even Ludwig, who had said that Dettomorian was a misunderstood but kind friend, turned pale and hesitantly asked.

Dettomorian deserved special treatment in many ways.

Ludwig had seen civilians praying to strange idols and getting killed by guards.

However, seeing the idols and spell circles filling the underground space, even the

priests who had never harmed others in their lifetime under the belief of embracing and enlightening heretics would ponder if Dettomorian should first be tied to the stake.

Dettomorian had managed to get away with being called the heretic among heretics due to being a Royal Class student at the temple.

Certainly, even civilians who knew nothing about heresy would think that these were the results of evil deeds committed by heretics when they saw this scene.

Despite the ominous and strange sights that they passed, everyone felt uneasy.

"It's okay."

As an experienced person, Ellen fearlessly strode down into the underground.

At the core and center of the spell circles.

Upon arriving at the space equivalent to an underground storage room, Ellen could see Dettomorian still sitting in the center of the spell circles.

Independent of the strange and ominous energy felt, the place was originally chaotic.

That's why Ellen couldn't tell if Dettomorian was still praying for the same thing.

It was impossible to recognize if the arrangement of the idols had changed or if new spell circles had been drawn. It had always been cluttered.

However.

"You're here."

"Yes."

Dettomorian spoke as she saw the four of them suddenly appear.

The meaning of her words was unclear.

Whether he knew they would come or was just acknowledging their arrival.

Dettomorian spoke in a way that not only was hard for others to understand but also made it impossible to discern his intentions.

Ellen wasn't particularly close to Dettomorian, and Ludwig had tried to become friends but had failed.

Heinrich and Louise were frozen stiff.

Louise's abilities weren't weak either, and there was no need to mention Heinrich.

However, there was something about this scene that overwhelmed people.

"Did you think we would come?"

In response to Ellen's question, Dettomorian gazed at the faintly flickering candle before him as it continuously emitted light.

"Well…"

Another ambiguous answer.

Without fear, Ellen approached Dettomorian and sat down across from him, with only one candle between them.

The hero and the shaman sat facing each other, separated by a single candle.

"Have you still been praying for peace lately?"

"No…"

Until Ellen, Bertus, and Turner arrived, Dettomorian had been praying for peace.

"What are you doing, then?"

At Ellen's question, Dettomorian answered softly.

"Safety."

"And peace."

Safety and peace.

Ellen tilted her head at those words.

"I was praying for the safety and peace of your soul."

“…For me?"

"Yes."

Dettomorian said quietly.

"Because that's the same as wishing for peace."

Ellen still can't understand Dettomorian's words.

However, in this strange scene, it sent shivers down her spine to hear that a shaman performing an unknown ritual was suddenly praying for her.

"I see."

But Ellen lowered her head slightly, looking at Dettomorian.

"Thank you."

She expressed her gratitude.

"…”

Just like Ludwig did.

Ellen knew that Dettomorian was not a bad person.

It's still the same.

The outcome of shamanism was unknown, and it was unknown whether it really worked. It's unknown whether the symbol given by Dettomorian will truly protect Ellen, and whether his prayers for peace and Ellen's soul will be effective.

But knowing that his prayers were sincere, Ellen was grateful to Dettomorian.

Ellen, who expressed her gratitude to Dettomorian, cautiously raises her head.

Dettomorian looked at Ellen with an expression that was hard to tell if he knew something or knew nothing.

Dettomorian, who already looked rather extraordinary, appeared even more so in this space.

If he usually looked gloomy, he seemed indescribable in this dark and dismal space.

Did we come to the wrong place?

Did we accidentally set foot somewhere we shouldn't have while chasing an event?

The same thought couldn't help but arise in everyone's mind.

But Ellen spoke quietly, looking at Dettomorian.

"There's a graveyard in the basement of the Holy Knights' Cathedral."

"…"

Despite the sudden start of the main subject, Dettomorian listened quietly to Ellen's words.

"It's a graveyard where priests and holy knights with strong divine powers during their lifetime are buried."

There was no need to beat around the bush, so she started with the main point.

Since the story was too long to start with, she asked only what needed to be asked.

"Someone seems to have revived the skeletons in the graveyard as undead and taken them somewhere."

"…"

"Is such a thing possible?"

As she spoke, Ellen wondered if this question itself might be impolite.

Assuming that Dettomorian knew the evil magic of creating undead, it could be rude to have come to him with this question.

However, at Ellen's simple but not-so-light question, Dettomorian fell silent.

Dettomorian's answer was neither possible nor impossible.

"Don't do it."

“…Huh?"

"It's better not to…”

Again, an incomprehensible statement.

But because it was completely incomprehensible, Ellen felt she could somewhat understand what Dettomorian was saying.

"Just staying still is… better?"

"Yes…”

It must have been a suggestion to not delve into this issue and let it be.

"Can you explain the reason in detail?"

"No…”

It was unclear whether he couldn't explain, whether she wouldn't understand even if he did, or whether he simply couldn't tell her. It was impossible to comprehend.

Everyone quietly listened to the strange exchange between Ellen and Dettomorian.

Their conversation seemed both engaging and completely nonsensical.

Ludwig approached the two silently.

"Detto."

"…"

Ludwig sat down beside Ellen.

"Do you know something? If you do, please tell us."

"…"

"I'm not sure. The priestess I tried to help turned out to be a terrible person, and I don't even know what she was trying to do through me. Now, no matter how wrong that priestess was… I just want to know what happened and what's going to happen."

"You'll die…"

"…What?"

Not only Ludwig but also Ellen, Louise, and Heinrich, who had been quietly listening, couldn't hide their confusion at Dettomorian's words.

Dettomorian, still wearing a gloomy expression, looked at Ludwig and slowly opened his mouth.

"Ludwig, if you go any further, you'll die."

At this sudden prophecy, Ludwig's face turned pale.

"Do nothing…"

Though they couldn't understand anything else,

Ellen and Ludwig knew that Dettomorian was genuinely worried for Ludwig.

A sudden prophecy.

Its content was excessively simple.

Death.

And that prophecy targeted Ludwig.

Caught off guard by these words, Ludwig stiffened like a stone, his mouth agape.

Ellen was equally taken aback.

"What are you talking about? Ludwig would suddenly end up dead?"

"…"

Ludwig had no intention of arguing or getting angry.

Ludwig wasn't the type to do that to a friend in the first place.

"Can't you say something……. please?"

Ellen asked on behalf of the speechless Ludwig.

The reason for saying such a thing, and what he saw, if anything.

"I can't persuade you……. and I can't explain……."

That was all Dettomorian had to say. Whether it meant they wouldn't understand what he saw, or he himself didn't know why he knew this, he didn't say.

Neither Ellen nor Ludwig could bring themselves to ask Dettomorian, with his gloomy expression, any more questions.

"You have to tell us something! What should we do if you suddenly say he's going to die and don't say anything else!"

Thus, Heinrich, who had been watching from behind, approached Dettomorian and scolded him, looking down at him.

"Youngest……!"

Louise, who saw her son took action in this unsettling and ominous situation, was also taken aback and gently grabbed Heinrich's shoulder.

Dettomorian silently looked up at Heinrich, his eyes slightly narrowed.

A penetrating gaze.

And for a moment, he glanced at the anxious Louise behind him.

"…!"

In that brief stare, Heinrich felt a chilling sensation as if all the hair on his body stood on end.

Even though it was just a brief look, it felt as if Dettomorian had grasped some hidden truth.

At that gaze, Heinrich unknowingly broke out in cold sweat down his spine, and Louise felt suffocated.

Heinrich sensed that he shouldn't meddle with Dettomorian carelessly.

"Dettomorian."

"Yes…"

Nonetheless, Ellen, who trusted Dettomorian in this situation, called out to him.

"Why is this so dangerous, why would Ludwig die, why is it better not to know… If we don't get a proper explanation, I - no, we - can't help but look deeper into this matter."

"…"

"It's not that I don't trust your words. But there's too much at stake in this matter. It doesn't seem like something we can just leave alone."

"You're right…"

Dettomorian nods quietly as if agreeing with Ellen's words.

"My words are small… small and weak, with scant evidence. Trust is lacking. Explanations are insufficient. Persuasiveness is low…"

For the first time in a long while, Dettomorian doesn't hesitate or stutter in his

speech.

"I speak of what I have seen."

"I don't speak of what I haven't seen."

"But, of course."

"My words don't always come true."

"What I've said might just turn out to be nonsense."

"But, speaking of death in an age where death is rampant isn't such a difficult prophecy."

"Everyone dies someday."

"Everyone can die at any time."

"In a time when death is as common as the widespread hunger and poverty."

"Anyone's death would seem easily foreseeable."

"It's easier than predicting ordinary fate."

"So."

"My words aren't always correct."

"What I've seen doesn't always come true."

"But this time."

"It must be right."

"Ludwig."

"Don't do anything."

"You'll die."

Death was overly pervasive in this world.

That was why, when looking at anyone's fate, it was easier to see death.

That was why it must be true.

Neither Ludwig nor the others knew why this matter was related to his death.

On their way to inquire about shamanism and the rites of the heretics, they unexpectedly heard a prophecy of death.

Ludwig, frozen, stared at Dettomorian.

Speaking of Ludwig's death must be because he did not wish for Ludwig's death.

"Let me ask you one thing."

After a long silence, Ludwig spoke with a hardened expression.

"Will I die in vain?"

"…"

"Unable to do anything, as I am now, powerless to do anything on my own. Only receiving help, blaming myself for everything being my fault, for my powerlessness. Just causing trouble for others. Not being helpful in any way. Like that……."

Ludwig spoke with a miserable expression.

"Will I die like that?"

Dettomorian remained silent at Ludwig's question.

"…"

He gave no answer.

But this time, the silence felt different to everyone.

While the meaning of the previous silence was unknown, the current silence was a

deliberate withholding of words.

Because speaking would bring about some sort of consequence.

Though he would die.

It would not be a meaningless death.

Dettomorian didn’t say anything.

The shaman spoke of what he saw. He didn’t speak of what he doesn't see.

For a shaman who cannot lie, not speaking the truth is the only lie.

"It's not like that, then."

"…”

"Detto, right?"

Dettomorian didn’t say anything.

"That's enough for me."

It was not a meaningless or futile death.

Though they didn’t know what would happen, the mere fact that death was imminent implied that something could be done.

Instead, they found hope in the possibility of doing something.

Even if death awaited, even if those words were absolute.

The hope that it might not be absolute was not entirely absent, either.

The very notion of being able to do something was what Ludwig had yearned for, ever since the death of Delphin Izzard and the loss of his arm.

After a long silence, Dettomorian finally lowered his head.

"Destiny is completed by those who seek to change it."

Once, someone had said,

‘As if they tried to change their fate and ended up like this.’

‘As if they had longed for it and achieved it.’

"Am I… the same?"

Dettomorian saw the future, but he instinctively knew that by trying to change it, he had fulfilled it.

Trying to prevent Ludwig's death had, in fact, pushed him forward.

Though the future was known, people did not know.

So, he realized that he had inadvertently propelled Ludwig forward.

"Am I unable to escape this fate as well?"

No one understood what Dettomorian was saying.

But they could sense his self-loathing and resignation in his words.

Silent, Dettomorian soon raised his head.

"Find Asher."

"What?"

Everyone was taken aback by this unexpected statement.

"Then, you'll understand."

A being with no reason to be mentioned in this situation.

An already deceased friend.

What does searching for someone who cannot return have to do with this matter?

"What do you mean? Find Asher?"

"You! You keep making these incomprehensible remarks. What do you want to say?"

As Ludwig was bewildered and Heinrich's old temper started to surface,

"Leave."

Dettomorian issued a stern command.

"I don't want to change anything more by talking further."

The shaman had already begun to fear his own words.

With his firm stance and the desperate look on the shaman's face, they could not ask any more questions.

Though Dettomorian often spoke in riddles, he was not known to be harsh.

Thus, plainly telling them to leave was almost the first time he had ever spoken to someone in a commanding tone.

It didn't matter who was listening.

Everyone was shocked, unable to understand or even guess his intentions behind his enigmatic words.

Left alone in the underground storeroom of the club building, with only a few lit candles, Dettomorian sat quietly.

Whether he was praying for something, contemplating something, or doing nothing at all, no one could tell.

In that silence, as the candles burned down,

A small, quiet figure approached.

-Meow

"…”

A black cat.

Dettomorian did not even look at the cat.

The cat quietly approached and sat across from Dettomorian.

After its initial cry, the cat simply stared at Dettomorian.

Neither the cat nor the shaman spoke.

A long silence ensued.

An hour.

Or maybe two.

After an indeterminable amount of time had passed in the silence between the cat and the shaman,

"All I could do was this…”

The shaman slowly opened his mouth.

"Choosing the lesser danger over the greater one…”

The cat listened quietly to the shaman's excuse-like words, showing no reaction.

"But, in the end, knowing everything might just lead to… I don't even know…”

The shaman lowered his head, speaking with a tone of lament.

"What if I had known the future completely…”

-…

"Even if I had known it completely, the future would change according to my actions. Knowing the future is, perhaps, meaningless."

-…

"Or is it that the very act of knowing the future incompletely… was arranged to fulfill that destiny?"

-…

"I wasn't unaware that I was no different…"

The shaman stared at the flickering candle.

"Wanting to do something, and ruining it as a result…"

-…

"So, this is how it feels…"

Finally, the shaman slowly shifted his gaze to look at the cat.

"Trying to change a fate that even the gods could not change…"

-…

"How foolish."

The cat sat quietly, looking at the shaman.

"You don't need my words."

-…

"You know what you must do."

-…

"Then, just do it."

Upon the shaman's words, the cat looked at him for a long time before quietly getting up from its spot.

The cat left without a word, and the shaman remained seated alone before the candles for a long time.

CHAPTER 598

The four of them left the club building where Dettomorian was and returned to the Royal Class Dormitory.

Their original purpose was to ask whether the heretics in the refugee village could turn the remains of the saints into the undead.

However, Ludwig heard a prophecy about his death.

And when Ludwig refused to back down from it, Dettomorian seemed to reluctantly give a hint.

But the hint was strange.

Find the already dead friend, Asher.

What connection did this have with the incident? The connection was so weak that it was impossible to know what it means.

"That guy, he's gone completely insane."

Heinrich frowned, as if Dettomorian was disgusting.

"No, Heinrich. Dettomorian is trying to discourage us. You know that."

"If he knew, then he should've explained it properly. What's going to happen? Just ignore him. He's a madman. You know how many people went crazy because of the war, right? You know too, don't you?"

All of them had been on the frontlines.

Everyone knew that it was common for people to lose their minds in the horrors of war.

The death of comrades, the horrors of battle, the pain of injury, and the fear emitted by monsters drove many to madness.

There were countless people who became disabled, unable to wield weapons or even lead a normal life.

All four of them in this place had seen firsthand the madness of war and those who went crazy in it.

"Don't worry about those unlucky words. And what's with the talk about Asher? I thought that guy was gloomy, but sane."

"Youngest."

At Heinrich's rough words, eventually, Louise stepped in.

“…Yes."

"Magic is an unknown power, and mages are beings we don't know."

"…”

"But even though it's an unknown power, haven't you seen the person?"

Louise looked at Heinrich.

"I didn't see him as a child who used power wrongly, nor as one who used his heart wrongly."

"But… it's just confusing. Too… rather, why didn't he tell us properly what's going on? Why did he say that?"

Heinrich's argument that Ludwig's impending death was nothing more than a curse wasn't entirely wrong.

"Since we don't know another mage who can give examples, that kid must have a good reason for doing so."

"It's meaningless for us to discuss why Dettomorian said that now."

"…”

Louise's restraint and Ellen's words left Heinrich with no choice but to be silent.

Ellen looked at Ludwig.

If they pursued this matter, Ludwig would die.

No one knows how or in what way he would die.

But Ludwig knew that his death wouldn't be in vain, and he was determined.

Would it be okay to destroy that determination?

You should stay out of it.

Was that the right thing to say?

"I don't believe I'm going to die."

As if understanding the meaning behind Ellen's gaze, Ludwig spoke with a determined expression.

"I don't doubt Dettomorian, but I believe I can do something. If I die in the end, it's not Dettomorian's fault, but mine."

"…"

People chose to believe what they want to believe. Even if it was a lie, they believed it, so how much more for the truth?

Death wasn't to be believed, and the process of dying wouldn't be meaningless—that was the belief.

"Yes."

Ellen silently nodded her head, looking at Ludwig's resolve.

Ludwig's stubbornness could not be broken.

If Ludwig, who had already been bent too many times, were to bend again, he would wither away while still alive.

That expression seemed like living through something worse than death, surviving

in a misery greater than death.

"The shaman said you would die, but not when."

The shaman had said that he would die, but not when it would happen.

Anyone could predict that a person would eventually die, so the prophecy of his death was something even a non-shaman could make.

Ludwig decided to deceive the shaman's prophecy instead.

Ellen also decided not to think about Ludwig's death. It might not be true.

Death had become so prevalent that it was easy to predict, but not everyone would die.

There was plenty of possibility that the prophecy was wrong.

Excluding Ludwig now, he was the type to seek another death.

So rather, it was better to keep him in sight.

"What on earth does it mean to find Asher?"

The next problem.

To find Asher.

What on earth did it mean that he would find out then?

It could be dismissed as nonsense. If Dettomorian was just a crazy person, then it would just be malicious nonsense.

However, it was too random.

It would have made sense if they were told to find the Five Great Religions Popes or to visit the scene again.

It was so unexpected and unimaginable that it was grotesque.

Where was he supposed to find Asher, who was already dead?

From the story of finding a dead friend, there could be only one conclusion.

"Is it… a suggestion to find Asher's tomb?"

At Ludwig's words, everyone couldn't help but think they knew even less.

The shaman's words were leading them further into a labyrinth.

Ellen slowly nodded her head.

"Even if going to see it might be meaningless, it can't be a bad thing."

The person they had sent away.

Although finding his tomb might make everyone feel miserable, it couldn't make the situation worse.

All four of them left the temple.

Their steps were cautious, as the Holy Knights or some other forces who had detected their pursuit might be watching or chasing after them.

Asher, who had talent in divine power.

Asher had taken on the role of a priest healing soldiers from the rear.

And he was torn to death by a rear attack of flying monsters.

It was difficult to even properly look at the gruesome state of his body, which they had barely recovered.

The bodies of those who had achieved enough merit in the war were laid to rest in the National Cemetery in the northern part of the Imperial Capital.

Most of the Royal Class students were those who had gained merit in the war, and although Asher had not fought directly, he had saved many lives.

Since Asher was not affiliated with the Holy Knights, his tomb was in the National Cemetery.

"I should have at least tried to find it."

Ludwig sighed with self-reproach, drowning in his despair and not even considering the thought of visiting his friend's tomb.

Heinrich and Ellen felt the same.

With the magic train not running, they had to cross the large river, pass the north, and even the Imperial Palace, so the journey was long.

On the street, there were soldiers clearing the snow, as well as familiar faces to the Royal Class members Ellen, Heinrich, and Ludwig.

-Whooosh!

A supernatural who manipulated the wind swept away the piled-up snow in an instant. From a distance, they could see their senior at work.

“Wow!”

“It's supernatural power!”

As the children found the snow-clearing supernatural powers fascinating, they playfully ran around and followed the senior. Despite looking troubled, the senior continued to herd the children, creating a bittersweet scene.

This supernatural had once used wind blades to pulverize monsters.

Now, the wind supernatural, who had displayed abilities almost matching Heinrich, was nothing more than an unknown person showing off fascinating powers to the children.

“Ah! Kids, it's dangerous. Don't come any closer!”

Seeing a war hero struggling with the encroaching children, Ludwig and Heinrich exchanged wry smiles.

Once all this was over…

Everyone wished for a day when supernatural powers, like controlling fire and wind, were merely fascinating abilities.

In a world where their powers were not crucial, it would be a peaceful one.

Hoping for peace, the four of them walked.

They walked to uncover the truth about the death that had already occurred.

Facing the death that would soon come.

Heading towards the grave of their deceased friend.

They walked through the streets, where snowflakes scattered.

All four of them were first-time visitors to the Imperial National Cemetery.

Ludwig and Heinrich had only heard later that Asher's body had been transported to the Imperial Cemetery after a brief funeral at the Allied Forces' base. They didn't know that the bodies of the meritorious were buried at the National Cemetery.

Ellen, one of the busiest people in the Allied Forces, hadn't even been able to attend Asher's brief funeral.

As for Louise, there was nothing to say.

So they hadn't known for long where Asher's grave was.

"Is that… the National Cemetery?"

The guards standing in front of the massive gate, despite being hit by snow, were diligently protecting the entrance to the cemetery.

And in front of the cemetery gate, visitors braved the weather, waiting for their turn to enter.

The line wasn't long due to the weather.

Although Ellen could have easily ignored the queue, she naturally stood in line with her companions.

Worried about exposing their identities, they remained silent.

However, they couldn't help but think about the various reasons for visiting the cemetery in this weather.

Those who came to the cemetery in this weather must have had a compelling reason.

What could be the reason for visiting the National Cemetery in this weather, even enduring the snow?

They must have been relatives.

Visitors related to the deceased must have come to pay their respects.

They couldn't help but watch the diverse group of visitors waiting in line with a heavy heart.

After some waiting, Ellen's turn arrived.

"Uh… Hero?"

Since Ellen's face was well-known, the appearance of the Hero amongst the visitors caused a stir among the guards.

"I'd like to keep it quiet."

"Yes, yes! Understood."

With her request to avoid drawing attention, the guards were surprised but warned their colleagues to avoid causing a commotion.

Ellen's face was practically an ID in itself, so the verification of the other three's identities proceeded rather casually.

Ellen and her companions quickly made their way after learning the location of

Asher's tomb from the desk beyond the guards.

They all shared the same thoughts.

It was natural to feel somber at the thought of going to a friend's tomb.

At the same time, they wondered.

What clues could possibly be found in this cemetery blanketed in pure white snow?

Probably none.

Perhaps Dettomorian only mentioned it to remind them of something they had forgotten.

But then, what was the meaning behind the statement that they would learn something once they found Asher?

The interior of the national cemetery wasn't cleared of snow like the other streets, so their feet sank deep into the snow.

"It's vast…"

Ludwig muttered as he stared blankly at the national cemetery.

The national cemetery was located at the northernmost edge of the Imperial Capital.

Now, a refugee camp had formed beyond the edge, but in the past, it would have been completely outside the Imperial Capital.

"It must not have been this big originally."

"Ah…"

Heinrich let out a small exclamation at Ellen's words.

Even without knowing the exact details, they could predict.

The national cemetery in the northern part of the Imperial Capital had inevitably undergone two expansions.

The first during the Great Demon War.

The second after the Gate incident.

War took away countless lives, and inevitably, more tombs were needed for the meritorious dead.

That was why Ellen could tell just from the map of the national cemetery which areas contained the tombs of the Great Demon War veterans and which areas had been expanded after the Gate incident.

Now, the four of them were heading to Asher's tomb.

To the cemetery area expanded after the Gate incident.

"So all these tombs… are from after the Gate incident?"

As Ludwig murmured, Heinrich nodded.

By now, they weren't thinking about finding clues at Asher's tomb; they were simply overwhelmed by the pervasive presence of death.

So many had died and been buried here.

This cemetery, too, had only a small fraction of the total number of tombs.

Yet, its scale was still overwhelming.

Countless deaths.

But compared to all the deaths that had occurred since the Gate incident, it was but a speck.

Even that speck of a cemetery was enough to overwhelm those who saw it.

Ludwig muttered blankly.

"Just how many people died…"

"About 95 percent of all cities were destroyed."

Louise spoke.

"You can assume that about the same percentage of people died."

Most cities had been destroyed, so it wasn't an exaggeration to assume that the population had decreased by a similar scale. In fact, it could be even more.

If 5 percent of all humanity had died, it would still be an enormous number of deaths.

But the opposite.

Around 95 percent had died.

It was impossible to count, so they had to speak in terms of ratios.

A cemetery was a place where one couldn't help but think about death.

Speculating about the lives of the deceased while looking at their graves.

Thinking about one's own death.

In the end, life.

One couldn't help but think about how to live.

Ironically, being in a place where death was displayed made one think about life.

What is life?

What is the reason for living?

A cemetery was a space where every human being has to confront the stark truth that everyone died, and as a result, one couldn't help but think about what it meant to live.

Ellen, Heinrich, and Louise.

And Ludwig, who heard that death was waiting.

Each walked silently, lost in their thoughts.

Crossing the snow-covered, vast graveyard, Ellen and her companions soon arrived at Asher's tomb.

Blessed with a talent for divine power, Asher had healed countless wounded soldiers.

He had joined the army not to kill, but to save lives, and met his death in the process.

"Asher…"

Ludwig stared quietly at the tombstone.

No one wept.

Not that they had tried to forget, but they had become unable to think about their friend's death, swept away by the war.

When winter passed and spring arrived, and the army resumed its march, the three, excluding Ludwig, would return to the battlefield. Worry was for those with nothing to do.

Ludwig was the one who would stay here, contemplating life and death.

Ironically, those who lived closest to death on the battlefield were too busy to even find the time to worry.

Ludwig continued to gaze at the tombstone.

He wished the prophecy of Dettomorian were true.

Rather than feeling guilt for surviving in front of a friend's grave, he wanted to do something, anything.

Even if death lay at the end of it.

He wished for a role.

It didn't have to be as significant as Ellen's.

He didn't need supernatural powers like Heinrich.

He didn't have to be a commander like Louise.

Even a pebble on the battlefield would do.

For those who had been sacrificed, and for those who would be.

He wanted to fight.

"…"

Ludwig sat in front of the tombstone for a while before standing up.

Everyone looked frostbitten, but no one was shivering.

"So…"

Louise opened her mouth quietly.

It wasn't something to say in front of someone's grave, but in the end, there was an uncomfortable conversation that had to be had, no matter the risk.

"I don't understand the meaning of this place…"

Louise, of course, didn't know the temple students well.

So, she looked at everyone, thinking that if there were any clues, they would be something she didn't know.

Heinrich wanted to dismiss Dettomorian's words as nonsense.

But even if they were nonsense, they were too unpleasant and upsetting.

The claim that visiting the tomb of a dead classmate would reveal everything.

"No matter how much I think about it, it's strange. Even if he's insane, there's no reason to play such a prank…"

That's why Heinrich, finding himself in front of Asher's tomb, was more suspicious than ever of Dettomorian's words being too unpleasantly false.

What could possibly be the reason for such nonsense? Neither the speaker nor the listeners, who had walked all the way to the northern part of the Imperial Capital for nothing, would find it enjoyable.

"Do you figure something out…?"

Ludwig looked at Ellen as if asking for salvation.

Leaving everything else aside, Ludwig had continuously seen Ellen make smarter judgments and moves than himself.

Ludwig couldn't understand anything now, but he thought Ellen might know something, so he kept staring at her helplessly.

However, in this case, it wasn't that Ludwig was too stupid to realize anything.

"I have no idea."

Ellen couldn't grasp anything either.

"What does Asher have to do with the tomb raiding incident involving the Holy Knights and the deaths of the heretic inquisitors?"

As Heinrich had said, they had done something stranger than finding a needle in a haystack. They had only acted on the belief that Dettomorian possessed a peculiar foresight.

"We'll have to go back and ask. If we grab him by the collar and ask why he said such nonsense, he'll have to say something."

Heinrich couldn't help but get increasingly agitated. Dettomorian should have either spoken clearly or not said anything at all, instead of making vague statements without directly mentioning anything.

Seeing Heinrich begin to get worked up, Ellen spoke.

"Calm down. Dettomorian… I don't think he said those things to us with bad

intentions. If he didn't speak clearly, there must be a reason. It's not like we're in trouble if we can't find any clues here."

Even if Dettomorian's clues turned out to be meaningless, they were not in a difficult situation, nor had they fallen into a trap.

Heinrich sighed at Ellen's words.

"Ellen… I get what you're saying. I might be getting angry for no reason, but there was no basis for what he said. There's no connection between us coming here and the case we're pursuing. The only commonality is that the Tomb of The Saint was a graveyard, and this place is a graveyard, but that's it…"

"…?"

"There is one commonality, though… isn't there?"

Although they couldn't figure out the connection, there was indeed a commonality.

No matter how it happened, both places were graveyards.

CHAPTER 599

It all began with the death of Rowan, but the root of the matter was the excavation of the Holy Knights' underground tomb.

Dettomorian had said that they would understand once they found Asher. The meaning of those words was still unclear.

However, their destination this time was also a national cemetery.

There was that commonality.

The tombs of the saints had been plundered.

And there was the possibility that the remains had been resurrected as undead.

Dettomorian had said to find Asher. Then they would understand everything.

If the message to find Asher meant to go to the national cemetery of the Imperial Capital, then it was eventually about finding another tomb.

That thought was frightening.

Louise murmured quietly.

"Could it be that the ones who created the undead have done the same thing here…?"

Louise's words made Ludwig's expression tense.

"But, there aren't many people who can access the Holy Knights' Cathedral… This place is so open, would it be possible for that to happen here?"

The national cemetery was an open space. If such an event occurred, someone would inevitably see it.

"It might have been possible if it was a night with no people. And a mage was involved. If they could use noise-canceling and teleportation, then it would have

been possible for them to do such a thing here."

The underground tomb of the Holy Knights.

And the national cemetery.

If the clue Dettomorian provided was a hint that the incident didn't just occur in the Holy Knights' underground tomb?

"But if that happened, wouldn't this place be in the same situation as when the Holy Knights' tomb was disturbed? It's not an ordinary incident."

Heinrich raised the question.

It was a natural point.

A large-scale tomb raid, or an undead transformation site. Such an event could not be easily overlooked. If something like that happened at the national cemetery, measures would have been taken at the royal level, just like when the Tomb of the Saints was in emergency.

However, the snow-covered national cemetery was calm and peaceful.

It did not look like a place where something suspicious and ominous, like the undead transformation, had occurred.

"You're right, it seems like nothing happened."

As Ludwig said, it was unlikely that such a quiet place had experienced an incident.

The commonality of the tombs.

Whether there was any meaning to it, or whether they were all just being misled by Dettomorian's nonsense, they couldn't tell.

"Wait a moment…"

But in the midst of it all, Ellen bit her lip slightly.

"Did you figure something out?"

"Didn't we wait in line?"

"In line?"

"Yes."

Ellen looked at Louise.

"Do you remember waiting in line when we entered here?"

“…Yes, we did."

"Why did we wait in line?"

"Why did we wait in line, you ask?"

At Louise's question, Ellen furrowed her brow.

"To be precise, the problem isn't the line, but that they were checking our identities."

At her words, Louise nodded as well.

It was a brief glimpse of the situation, but it had happened just a moment ago.

"Visitors were not restricted based on their identity."

Among the visitors were nobles, soldiers, and even those who appeared impoverished.

Soon, it was clear that there were no restrictions on entry based on a visitor's identity.

"Although there weren't many visitors, the fact that everyone could enter means that anyone can come into this national cemetery."

"That's true."

"Then why are they checking our identities at a place where anyone can enter?"

Why were they checking identities when they were not restricting access?

“……It might be to track people down when a crime occurs. There must be many unidentified people around. But……. I'm not sure if this is a place where crimes would take place……”

Crimes tended to happen in places where they are possible.

Why, in a place filled with nothing but graves, would they need to verify the identities of everyone who enters? What kind of crime could possibly occur here that would warrant such a measure?

None of the four knew how access to the national cemetery usually works.

But something.

Something felt off.

"We should meet with the administrator."

They still didn't know what was going on.

But Ellen thought differently than Heinrich.

Dettomorian's words must have some meaning. There must be something they can find out here.

That was what Ellen believed.

Meeting the director of the Royal National Cemetery was not difficult.

If they could ask for an audience with the leader of the Holy Knights, then meeting someone at the Royal National Cemetery should be even easier.

When Ellen called for the director at the cemetery administration office, the director hurriedly guided them all to his office as if his feet were on fire.

"Phew……”

It wasn't until Heinrich entered the room that Louise muttered in a daze, seeing his

cold hands and frostbitten nose.

"Oh……. You must have been cold."

"No, Sister……. I'm fine."

Louise couldn't help but blame herself for having overlooked a problem that obviously needed attention, simply because it didn't affect her greatly.

Of course, Heinrich had just started to warm up, and his days of whining were behind him, so he tried to act as if he was perfectly fine.

"It's an honor to meet you!"

"Hello."

When the director of the National Cemetery saw Ellen, he couldn't hide his embarrassment.

This was a common and typical reaction, as the guards at the entrance had shown.

Sometimes, the hair on Ellen's body would stand on end when faced with such treatment, but she had no choice but to get used to it.

While the director busily prepared tea for them, the four sat idly.

What should they say their purpose was for coming here?

Was it simply because they were surprised to see Ellen, or was there something fishy going on? They couldn't tell just by looking.

But if this place was related to the incident, the director should know something.

Watching the director nervously preparing tea for himself and the four of them, Ellen took a polite sip of the tea.

Ellen didn't know much about tea.

But she could feel the warmth and sincerity from the director's demeanor. His expression was as if he had encountered a once-in-a-lifetime stroke of luck.

What am I?

I'm not someone who deserves this kind of treatment.

Struggling to hold back such thoughts that gnawed at her mind, Ellen opened her mouth.

"It's not that, but we had to wait in line when we came in."

"Ah, I'm sorry. A busy hero like you should not have had to wait. If you had told the guards, you could have come in right away……”

"No, that's not what I meant."

Ellen felt that if she misspoke, the middle-aged man before her might have a heart attack.

It would be ridiculous to think that way.

A hero who came to complain because they couldn't cut the line? Ellen didn't think that way, not even a little bit.

"They were verifying our identities."

"Yes, that's right."

"Is there anyone who cannot enter the national cemetery?"

"Huh? Ah…”

The administrator scratches the back of his head at Ellen's question, as if feeling apologetic.

"Those with unclear residences or unregistered identities are restricted from entering."

Such individuals were not common.

However, the reality in the Empire was that there were now many of these people.

"You must be talking about refugees?"

"Well, to be precise, yes… But, of course, not all refugees are banned. If their identity is clear and their residence is certain…"

But for the refugees living in makeshift shelters, proper identification would be nearly impossible.

This meant that they would all be unable to enter the national cemetery.

The important thing was not their status or property.

"Does that mean only those who can be traced are allowed?"

"Yes…"

If a person could be traced, they could enter; if not, their entry would be denied.

The reason was simple.

Crime.

Refugees might commit crimes in the national cemetery.

Hiding and sleeping in a building to avoid the cold, or attempting grave robbery. Thus, controlling their access was not unusual.

Ellen narrowed her eyes, pondering her next question.

"Of course, refugees have the right to mourn as well. I know they are pitiful and needy people."

Upon mentioning the control of refugees' entry, the administrator misunderstood Ellen's concerned expression as thinking that the control was unfair.

"Yes, that's true."

Of course, Ellen had not come to inquire or challenge about that, so she replied halfheartedly.

"Indeed, until recently, the national cemetery was open to everyone. Anyone, including refugees, could enter. Yes, definitely…”

“…Yes?"

Ellen, as well as the other three, had no choice but to react to the administrator's excuse.

"Are you saying that access control has changed?"

In response to Louise's question, the administrator nodded vigorously, even though he didn't know who she was.

"Yes, that's right. Visitors are very inconvenienced, but there must be a reason for it, right? There haven't been any problems until now…”

"Everyone could enter before, but recently that's not the case…”

"Was there some kind of incident?"

"A crime worse than theft occurred… We had no choice…”

"What happened?"

The administrator spoke with an apologetic expression, sweating nervously.

“…Someone desecrated a grave."

At those words,

All four expressions hardened simultaneously.

Among the visitors, someone had desecrated a grave.

If they had heard the story without knowing anything else, they might simply think that someone had committed such an act.

However, they all couldn't help but feel that the situation was too much of a

coincidence.

Grave robbery.

Grave desecration.

Weren't they strikingly similar?

"How did they desecrate it?"

As Ellen's expression became even more serious, the administrator had no choice but to sweat profusely.

"It seemed like someone tried to rob a grave… That was the situation. Although they seemed to have failed in digging it up, the mere attempt was a big deal…"

"Did you catch the culprit?"

"Well, at the time, there were no restrictions on entering the cemetery…"

They discovered signs of an attempted grave robbery. However, since the national cemetery was open at the time, they couldn't catch the perpetrator.

After that incident, the national cemetery administration started to deny entry to those with unclear identities.

"Is it true that the grave robbery attempt failed?"

"Yes? Although the grass was damaged, that was all… We suspect that the attempt failed because the ground was frozen due to the cold weather, and the shovel couldn't penetrate the soil."

Although it was an eerily coincidental situation, it wasn't impossible that completely different individuals committed the crime.

"What could the grave robbers have taken if they had managed to dig up the graves?"

Louise focused on a more intuitive aspect.

"I don't know why they would do such a thing… We don't know that either."

"Don't you?"

It was essential to know if there were any valuable treasures buried in the tomb.

If there were, it could be a simple grave robber's act; if not, it might require further suspicion.

Momentarily excited by the sudden appearance of a hero, he felt drained as he was interrogated at every turn.

"Recently, we have been burying the deceased sent from the allied forces' garrison according to a fixed procedure. Since the funerals are conducted by the allied forces, we cannot know if there are any valuable burial items."

"Ah… I see."

At the cemetery director's words, Louise slowly nodded in agreement.

"Burial items…?"

Ludwig, who didn't understand the term, asked and Louise answered.

"It refers to items buried with the deceased. Things the deceased cherished during their lifetime or items they want to be buried with. Naturally, when a high-ranking noble dies, there are many valuable burial items, and grave robbers aim for those."

"Ah… I see."

If the cemetery director's words were accurate, grave robbers had recently entered the national cemetery.

Whether their intention was to steal burial items or something else, the attempt had failed.

After confirming that, the cemetery administration only allowed entry to individuals with confirmed identities.

There was a high possibility of treasure within the cemetery, so it wasn't strange for there to be grave robbers.

It was a plausible but failed attempt.

Yet, it was an eerily coincidental situation.

Ellen stared at the cemetery director.

It felt like something was about to be revealed, yet it remained elusive.

"The date."

That's why Ellen asked her final question.

"When did the grave robbery incident occur?"

"Ah, I'll check right away."

The cemetery director went to his desk and began rummaging through some documents.

His attitude was different from that of the Holy Knight Commander, who had been ambiguous. He seemed to fear and respect Ellen and wanted to help her in any way possible.

It was clear that he had nothing to do with the incident and wasn't trying to hide anything.

Of course, that could also be a disguise.

The cemetery director soon provided an answer.

"Ah… We cannot be sure if this happened on the day of the incident. The area is so vast, and our workforce is limited, so it could have happened a few days prior…"

"Fine, when was it?"

"It was discovered on the evening of the 3rd of the 12th month."

Upon hearing this, Ellen looked at Louise.

"That day, huh?"

"Yes."

The 3rd of the 12th month

The day the grave robbery incident occurred at the Tomb of the Saints.

The coincidence surpassed mere chance; the suspicion had now reached a level where it could no longer be considered accidental.

CHAPTER 600

Dawn, the 3rd of the 12th Month.

The scene of the theft at the Holy Knights' Tomb of the Saints was discovered.

On the same day, December 3rd, in the evening.

Suspicious activities, seemingly an attempted grave robbery, were discovered at the national cemetery. Since then, access control at the national cemetery had been strengthened to guard against grave robbers.

It couldn't be said that the two incidents were completely unrelated, but the coinciding dates seemed too suspicious.

If it were the work of the same culprit, was their attempt at the national cemetery a failure?

"So that's where we just went."

"Yes."

The four of them left the management office and were heading back to the cemetery.

But this time, they were not heading to Asher's tomb.

After confirming the location of the tomb where the grave robbery attempt took place with the manager, they were on their way there.

The manager offered to guide them personally, but Ellen declined.

They had to see everything for themselves.

Of course, with the snow falling and the passage of time since the incident, it was uncertain what they could learn by going there.

But, as they had discovered something in the underground mausoleum of the Holy

Knights, they thought they might learn something by checking it out themselves.

"What on earth… What happened?"

Ludwig's head was about to explode from the complexity of the drastically changed case and its direction.

"Whatever happened, one thing is certain."

Heinrich bit his lip and spoke.

"I thought it was the crazy ramblings of a madman, but it turns out it wasn't."

Heinrich muttered, with a touch of self-mockery, as he wanted to slap himself for ignoring what Dettomorian had just said.

"There wasn't just one commonality, but two."

Louise quietly looked around the snow-covered national cemetery and spoke.

"Two, you say?"

In response to Ellen's question, Louise gave a short answer.

"The cemetery."

They had already left the management office and were walking quite a distance to enter the resting place of the fallen heroes.

"The places where those with extraordinary power were buried."

The commonality of the cemetery.

Beyond that, there was another commonality: the selected individuals who were buried there.

When there was only one crime scene, all problems originating from that scene had to be considered.

But now that another scene had been added, the intersection between the two

scenes had to be considered.

The more likely clues were those that were common to both scenes.

Louise exhaled a white breath and murmured softly.

"If they tried to create undead here as well, and the same thing happened in both places… This wouldn't have happened due to a desire for revenge or hatred toward the Five Great Religions."

When the underground mausoleum of the Holy Knights was the crime scene, it had to be considered that the incident might have been caused by anger towards the Holy Knights or the Five Great Religions. The desecration of turning the remains of the saints into undead could itself be an act of revenge.

However, the additional scene was the National Cemetery, which had little to do with the Holy Knights.

In that case, the motive was not revenge.

And the intersection.

The tombs of the saints who possessed extraordinary powers during their lifetime.

The National Cemetery, where those who had distinguished themselves in the Great Demon War or in the aftermath of the Gate Incident were buried.

The commonality of being the resting place for the powerful.

"Putting aside all other reasons, if the same thing was attempted here, the criminals' motive would be surprisingly simple."

“…I see."

Ellen seemed to understand what Louise wanted to say even before she finished her sentence, nodding her head as Louise quietly murmured.

When there are too many clues, a case becomes confusing.

However, once you find the commonalities between the clues, the process of

deduction becomes easier.

Through the increasingly vague connections between the case and the clues, they gradually drew closer to the truth.

"Perhaps, they just needed powerful undead."

Expressions of anger, revenge, and hatred all lost their power as clues.

For a moment, the direction of their deductions was lost amidst the complicated relationships and numerous forces involved.

It was certain that the criminals had been at the scene, and if their intentions matched those of the events in the underground of the Holy Knight's Order, the truth would become clearer.

The undead were not a means, but an objective.

They needed the undead.

A powerful undead.

Therefore, the criminals might have had a very simple intention: to find the tomb where the powerful were buried.

Louise von Schwarz made her judgment.

In front of a row of graves, no different from any other, Ellen stopped.

"This is it."

Among the nearby graves, a total of five were suspected to have been targeted for grave robbery. The grass covering the graves had been overturned, leading to this assumption, but the conclusion at the time was that an actual robbery had not taken place.

The cemetery management had no choice but to strengthen their access control based on the assumption that such an attempt had occurred, whether or not the

graves had been robbed.

It was a national cemetery where war heroes were buried.

Although countless in number, each was the grave of a hero. Naturally, if even one grave had been robbed, the head of the cemetery and all related parties would have faced severe consequences.

Of course, it was impossible to tell with the naked eye whether or not a robbery attempt had occurred. The gravestones and the ground itself were buried in snow.

Ellen looked around.

Due to the weather, there were very few visitors.

"This place isn't very noticeable."

"Indeed, it isn't."

The area was tucked away in a corner and slightly inside the woods, making it difficult to see from the center of the cemetery due to the trees blocking the view.

Whether attempting a robbery, performing a suspicious ritual, or even during the night, no one would notice any strange activities in this secluded area.

Ellen brushed the snow off the gravestones, checked the names of the graves suspected to have been targeted, and then turned to Heinrich.

"Heinrich, melt the snow."

"Got it."

Up until now, they had refrained from using their abilities to avoid drawing attention, but this place was hidden from view, and there were no visitors nearby.

Furthermore, at this point, it wouldn't matter if someone saw them.

Woosh!

The flame summoned by Heinrich radiated heat, quickly melting the thick layer of

snow.

Ellen, Louise, and Ludwig could all feel the scorching heat from the flame on their faces.

After a while, the snow had melted, revealing the bare ground of the cemetery.

The grass, withered and brown from winter, lay limp and soaked in the melted snow.

Five graves.

The flat ground behind the gravestones.

An attempted robbery would have involved digging up the ground.

Ellen felt the flat grass of the graves where the robbery attempts had occurred, and soon, after grabbing the ground a few times, she tore a chunk of grass from the earth.

"Ah, Ellen…!"

Ludwig was shocked to see Ellen desecrating the graveyard with her own hands, but she shook her head.

"It's not like I exerted much effort. It was already like this."

Grass is fundamentally intertwined at the roots. Even in winter, if the roots of the grass are severed, they won't reconnect with each other.

So Ellen had simply pulled out a portion of grass that had already been severed, along with a mound of dirt.

"It seems the caretakers have done their job quite thoroughly. They could have just ignored it."

Of course, after discovering the scene, they must have smoothed out the ground and made it look less suspicious. At a glance, it doesn't appear to have any problems.

If it weren't for a particularly sharp-eyed caretaker, they might have just passed by without noticing.

At Ellen's words, Louise nodded slowly.

"Visitors might have discovered it too. If it were the grave of a family member or friend, they would look more closely."

"I see."

Although the head caretaker said that it had caught the attention of the caretakers, it's also highly likely that one of the visitors had discovered it and reported it to the management office.

The reason they didn't mention the visitor's discovery is that the head caretaker could have lied, fearing backlash. And for Ellen, that level of lie is forgivable.

Visitors or caretakers noticed the unnatural mound of dirt and grass on the grave. They then suspected an attempted grave robbery.

And the scene was restored by the caretakers, making it look normal again.

Ellen carefully examined the ground and could see the shape of the unnatural mounds of dirt on the graves.

She saw it with her own eyes.

She came to see it.

And Ellen wasn't here just to look at the grass.

"Ellen…"

Ludwig muttered blankly.

"Is it okay to do this…?"

Heinrich also muttered blankly.

By now, they can guess what Ellen is going to do without her having to say it.

"It can't be helped."

Blue magic energy enveloped Ellen's hands.

There was only one thing to do if she wanted to know what happened here.

To verify with her own eyes.

-Thunk!

Ellen dug into the ground with her bare hands.

To check the grave.

Ellen began to exhume the grave.

The reason Ellen had firmly refused the offer of the management office head to accompany them was because there was a valid reason.

And while they didn't explicitly say what they had to do, everyone knew that they had to do this.

Even though they knew there had been an attempted grave robbery, the management office couldn't dig up the grave themselves to check – that would be madness.

However, Ellen had another possibility in mind, which is why she had to do it herself.

There was no need for anyone to help with what Ellen was doing.

Ludwig couldn't just stand idly by and tried to lend a hand, but Ellen told him to stay out of the way, saying it would hinder her.

The task, done without a shovel and using only bare hands, didn't take long.

She was a superhuman whose entire body was like a deadly weapon, having reached the master class. So when Ellen began digging with her entire body, she soon broke through the frozen earth and dug a deep pit.

"There's a body."

From below the pit, Ellen, covered in dirt, spoke.

Sure enough, there was a body. Ellen's eyes widened as she finally discovered the remains of a corpse at the bottom of the pit.

And above that pit, Ludwig, Heinrich, and Louise stared down at the scene with hardened expressions.

All of them had experienced death in all its gruesome forms and had seen their fair share of corpses.

They felt guilt, but they were no longer terrified or repulsed by the mere sight of a corpse.

If this were the underground cemetery of the Holy Knights, there should be no corpses.

Yet, the corpse remained.

"Wait, so… does that mean… this has nothing to do with the undead?"

As Heinrich pointed out, if this cemetery had no connection to the undead, the caretaker's words were true.

Someone had tried to rob the grave and failed.

In that case, Ellen had merely desecrated an innocent tomb.

She had only insulted the death of someone who should have been allowed to rest in peace.

"No, that's not it."

However, Ellen shook her head.

From the disturbed earth, she picked up a fragment.

"A piece of the coffin?"

Louise murmured, looking at what Ellen had picked up.

“…Yes, it seems so."

The buried coffin had been broken.

That was not something that could be done from the outside.

"If it were undead, they would have crawled out of the ground while breaking the coffin, and if it were grave robbers, they would have dug at least this far."

It would make sense for the undead to have broken the coffin while crawling out of the ground.

However, the grave robbers would have primarily aimed for the burial items inside the tomb.

Having dug the ground to expose the coffin, they wouldn't have bothered to noisily break it when they could have quietly taken the burial items.

Since the grave robbers wouldn't have intentionally caused a ruckus by breaking the coffin, it must have been the undead that broke the coffin while crawling out.

“…What is this corpse, then?"

But if the undead had broken the coffin themselves, it didn't make sense for the corpse that should have become an undead to remain as is.

In the Holy Knights' underground cemetery, the culprits left the scene undisturbed, but in this case, they concealed the scene and even buried the undead back into the ground without retrieving it.

It was clear that they had done something the grave robbers shouldn't have done, so it wasn't their work.

But if it were the work of someone with undead in mind, they didn't take the undead with them.

"Could it be someone else's corpse… or something like that?"

At Ludwig's question, Ellen furrowed her brow.

"I don't know. But even if that were the case, I can't think of any reason why they would do that. If they created an undead and placed another corpse in there, they should have done the same in the Holy Knights' underground cemetery. But why would they do that here and not there?"

It was strange to consider the possibility that they had turned the buried corpse into an undead, took it away, and then placed another corpse back into the tomb. It was an incredibly laborious and meaningless act.

There wouldn't be many people like Ellen who would actually dig up the ground to confirm the corpse.

And the moment they tried to confirm it, they would have to consider the possibility that the buried remains had been switched.

Therefore, resurrecting an undead and placing another corpse in the tomb would be a worthless and meaningless disguise.

It was strange if it was the work of the same perpetrator.

In the Holy Knights' underground cemetery, they showed no interest in concealing their actions, but they did so in this location.

They either didn't take the undead or switched the corpse.

"But… something's odd."

Heinrich expressed his doubts.

"What is it?"

"The person was buried this year… but the decay is so rapid?"

"…?"

Only then did Ellen take a closer look.

At Heinrich's question, Louise finally glanced at the tombstone.

"Gordon Shick, a high-ranking knight of Alskien. In the 10th month of this year…

how…”

It was now the 12th.

"So it's been only two months?"

"Yes."

At Louise's sigh, Ellen furrowed her brows while standing in the pit.

The corpse in front of her had hollowed-out eye sockets.

The 10th month was when the weather began to get colder.

Ellen didn't have detailed knowledge about the rate of decomposition, but to her eyes, the buried corpse had already undergone significant decay.

There was still some flesh and muscle, but it seemed too far-fetched for a corpse that had been buried after the cold set in.

"It seems like it really is a different corpse."

"I see…”

At Louise's words, Ellen nodded, disheartened.

She thought there was no reason to go through the meaningless act of switching corpses, but the corpse had indeed been swapped.

So, it was clear that it wasn't the work of grave robbers.

Ludwig murmured, dumbfounded.

"Why on earth… would someone do this…?"

They took the undead.

But this time, after taking the undead, they left another corpse in its place.

What could be the reason for doing such a thing?

Unable to reach any other possibilities yet, Ellen and the others could only assume that the culprits had engaged in a disgusting act devoid of any meaning.

"We'll have to dig up all the other graves as well."

In the end, Ellen had no choice but to carry out the grave excavation work several more times.

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